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MEN LIKE US: THE FIGURE OF THE MALE HOMOSEXUAL IN EDMUND WHITE'S FICTION

por

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ABSTRACT

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Edmund White is one of the most acclaimed American gay writers today. He has published six novels, a book of short stories, four other volumes of nonfiction, including his biography of Genet, and is a contributor to many literary magazines. In this dissertation I present a brief history of gay fiction in America in the last twenty years, a genre of which White is a strong representative, and find its relation with one of the most important fields of study in Gender Studies: Queer Theory. Then I discuss White's A Boy's Own Story, the novel which made him internationally known, and the short stories "Running on Empty" and "An Oracle" from the collection Skinned Alive. My intention is to discuss how White constructs the homosexual identity of his characters, and in which point they might differ or reinforce the usual stereotypes commonly associated with the male homosexual in Western cultures. As a support for this investigation I introduce some concepts taken from the theory proposed by the British critic Alan Sinfield and some principles of Cultural Materialist theory as a way to conduct and inform this research. In one of his books, The Wilde Century (1994), Sinfield traces the probable process from which the twentieth-century queer stereotype might have been created, having as its starting point The Wilde Trials in 1895. My intention is to verify what is

left of this stereotype today, especially in White's characters (making the necessary transposition of time and space), and whether White's fiction innovates in representing the male homosexual, especially in relation to AIDS.

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RESUMO

Edmund White é um dos escritores gays Americanos mais aclamados nos dias de hoje. Ele já publicou seis romances, um livro de contos e outros quatro volumes de não-ficção, incluindo a biografia de Genet. Também é colaborador de várias revistas literárias. Nesta dissertação eu apresento uma breve história da ficção gay nos Estados Unidos da América nos últimos vinte anos, gênero o qual White é um forte representante, e procuro traçar um paralelo de sua relação com um dos mais importantes campos de estudo dos Estudos de Gênero: Queer Theory. A seguir eu discuto o romance de White A Boy's Own Story, obra que o tornou internacionalmente conhecido e os contos "An Oracle" e "Running on Empty", tirados da coletânea Skinned Alive. Minha intenção é discutir como Edmund White constrói a identidade homossexual de seus personagens e em que pontos esta identidade difere ou reforça os estereótipos usuais comumente associados ao homossexual masculino na cultura ocidental. Como suporte teórico para esta investigação eu introduzo alguns conceitos tirados da teoria proposta pelo crítico Inglês Alan Sinfield e também alguns princípios da teoria do Materialismo Cultural como uma maneira de conduzir e informar esta pesquisa. Em um dos seus livros, The Wilde Century (1994), Sinfield traça o provável processo pelo qual o estereótipo do homossexual no século vinte foi criado, tendo como ponto de partida (ou marco inicial) o julgamento ao qual o escritor Oscar Wilde foi submetido em 1895. Também é minha intenção verificar o que ainda resta deste estereótipo nos dias de hoje (fazendo as necessárias transposições de tempo e espaço), e se White inova na representação do homossexual masculino, especialmente em relação à AIDS.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER III

Homosexuality poses a uniquely peculiar challenge to cultural stability because it seems to threaten the genetic cycle itself and the whole elaborate coding of binary sexuality. So it must be ruthlessly disarmed of its disruptive power. Transformed to childish dreams and neurotic jokes, it ceases to be serious. In this way its own transformative role is systematically repressed. Like jokers, dreamers, poets, and neurotics, homosexuals too (we have seen) are producers of signs.
(Harold Beaver)

Introduction

Edmund White can be considered one of the most challenging American writers today. He has just published The Farewell Symphony (1997), the closing volume of a trilogy that started with A Boy's Own Story(1982), an autobiographical work narrating his coming out as a gay teenager in America during the 1950's, and continued with The Beautiful Room is Empty (1988), the story of a gay hero tormented with his sexual condition.

This time White has portrayed the damage that AIDS has done to his acquaintances and to his own life. The Farewell Symphony tells the story of a man who has outlived the people he loved most. It is a story about loss, a manifest in the face of AIDS or, in his own words, a piece of "holocaust literature, exile's literature, convict's literature" (Out of the Closet 283).

White was born in Cincinnati, Ohio in 1940 and lived in America until 1983, when he moved to Paris. Before starting to write he worked as a journalist and served as executive director of The New York Institute for the Humanities. During the 1970's he began teaching literature and creative writing and has taught at Yale, Columbia and Johns Hopkins University. He was also a full professor of English at Brown.

If today White is an acclaimed writer and has received many literary awards, such as The National Book Critics Circle Award and The Lambda Literary Award for his Genet: A Biography (1993), it was only in 1973 that he published his first novel Forgetting Elena, the only book from which the gay experience is absent. His other books include Nocturnes for

the King of Naples (1978), States of Desire: Travels in Gay America (1980), Caracole (1985), The Burning Library (1994) and Skinned Alive (1995).

The genre to which he belongs - gay fiction - is a recent literary phenomenon. According to White in his article "Out of the Closet, on to the Bookshelf"[1], the gay liberation in the late sixties did not generate an appropriate "scene" for gay fiction right in its beginning. It was almost a decade later that a new gay novel started to appear. Gay liberation and its culmination in 1969 with the Stonewall riots in New York had enabled gay men to express themselves freely as they always wanted. This new "acquired" freedom was the central tenet of such fiction. By 1978 many gay writers started to publish their novels, among them Larry Kramer's Faggots and Andrew Holleran's Dancer from the Dance. Since then, a "gay trend" within the American literary market has been established.

Gay fiction had to come a long way before it could attain its present status. In the beginning, gay novels were sold only in the gay section of bookstores. When a review was published, it was done by a gay reviewer or, worse, it would receive negative criticism by a hostile heterosexual reviewer. Nevertheless, White claims, the revolution that gay fiction has cast upon the American literary market is an intense and rapid cultural change.

White states that when he was a teenager growing up in Cincinnati during the 1950's, things were a bit different:

> As a young teenager I looked desperately for things to read that might excite me or assure me I wasn't the only one, that might confirm an identity I was unhappily piecing together. In the early 1950's the only books I could find in the Evanston, Illinois, public library were Thomas Mann's Death in Venice (...) and the biography of Nijinski by his wife. (Out of the Closet 275)

In 1979 White and other six gay writers created a literary club called The Violet Quill in New York. They met once a month to discuss literature and to read their pages

together. At this time, White was writing A Boy's Own Story, the novel that made him internationally famous and which is considered now a representative work of contemporary American literature. With him were Felice Picano, Andrew Holleran, Christopher Cox, Robert Ferro, George Whitmore and Michael Grumley. They were part of the first generation of writers that came right after gay liberation, and their literature represented the dissident potential gay culture needed.

In 1983 White moved to Europe. He had received a Guggenheim fellowship which enabled him to settle in Paris to continue his work. There he wrote The Beautiful Room is Empty and Genet: A Biography, not to mention many short stories, some of them included in the collection Skinned Alive. After the recent publishing of The Farewell Symphony, his plans include a new novel about the death of his French lover Hubert Sorin and a possible come back to America to continue his teaching.

A peculiar characteristic of White's fiction is that people often have difficulty classifying it. Some people take it as a factual memoir rather than autobiographical fiction. Especially in his most recent works, where many of his characters are "stylizations" or amalgams of famous American writers and artists, people might think that what they are reading is the absolute truth.

In one specific passage of The Farewell symphony, the narrator tries to explain to a woman the process he goes through to write a novel: "My novel is purely autobiographical. Everything in it is exactly as it happened, moment by moment - sometimes even written down moments after the event"(40). As in real life, her reaction could not be different: "Isn't that what most people call a diary?"(40).

Asked about such difficulties concerning his fiction, White has said on a reading lecture:

> If I had told you in advance this was a memoir, and then put in all those details about the precise way a boy's hair was combed, how he slouched around the room, the precise words he said, how he smelled, how he sat down, and so on, you would have laughed at me. Because no one could possibly have remembered all that (The Importance 124).

But it is not only the readers who confuse the life and the work. White states that sometimes even he has to take care not to commit the same fault. According to him, it is the highly intimate and honest characteristics of his fiction that may raise the problem of classification.

Moreover, he argues that the high level of exposure in his work may function as a pretext for people's disapproval. But the honesty one may find in his fiction is also what attracts the reader's attention. It is this doubleness which makes his fiction so close to real life, and sometimes even more pungent. As he has said: "I put down things on the page that, if I have to discuss them at a cocktail party, or even on a talk show, make me blush" (The Importance 124).

For my research I have chosen the novel A Boy's Own Story (1982) and the short stories: "An Oracle" and "Running on Empty", taken from the collection Skinned Alive (1995). The first (as I have already mentioned) is the novel that brought White recognition in the literary circuit and has granted him a number of literary awards. The other two are considered (even for White) the best piece of fiction he has ever written.

I- Gay Fiction and the mainstream

In an excerpt of a review included on the cover of the 1995 Vintage edition of Skinned Alive, The Dallas Morning Star has said: "Mr. White is a gifted storyteller...If you happen to be homosexual, you'll read these tales as ruthlessly honest...If you are not gay, you will, because of their superb construction and deep humane intelligence...read them as a sign of the cheer and sorrow of all human existence."

Reading between the lines of such comment one finds an appeal for universality: if you *happen* to be homosexual, it is clear you will avidly read the book and identify with its stories. But, if you are not, its stories can still be made meaningful through their claim for universality: They have to be taken "as a sign of the cheer and sorrow of *all* human existence", as stated above (emphasis added).

Thus, it is as if the only way of making sense of gay fiction, the only way for gay fiction to be considered "good fiction" is to claim its universality (understood here as heterosexual) rather than its specificity. One cannot take the book as representative of the whole humanity because not everybody is born gay. In doing so, one plays a dangerous game, that of denying gay fiction its *real* status, acknowledging its production only when submitted to the rules of the dominant heterosexual culture.

Another distorted judgment concerning gay fiction is that it would be a "specialized" or "limited" kind of literature, i.e. only destined for homosexual readers. In "Out of the Closet, on to the Bookshelf" White claims that gay fiction is no more restricted than any other kind of fiction. According to him, its possible audience "is no more circumscribed than it is for any other constituency" (277).

To think in these terms about gay fiction would be an unjust treatment and a limitation. If it is specialized or restricted, so would be the literature produced by women or blacks and so on. Hence, this particularization is a feature of every good literature produced until now and cannot be taken as a substantial argument against gay literature. Thus, the two approaches undermine the potential of gay fiction: both the claim for universality or the accusation of particularization are negative factors that may hinder the development of gay fiction.

But of course there are other factors that, directly or indirectly, help gay fiction to become accepted and recognized. The achievements of gay and lesbian studies in many American campuses, for example, provide the ground in which these gender-related issues are developed, gay fiction included. Traditional universities such as Harvard and Yale have created centers for gay and lesbian studies and are now sponsoring conferences to discuss the matter. White himself has offered courses in gay and lesbian literature at Brown, where he examined the work of "standard" writers such as Virginia Woolf, E.M. Forster and Proust.

The increasing growth of the gay publishing industry also demonstrates that gay fiction can be a commercial possibility: it has never been as published and read as before. By the beginning of the 1990's, quality reviews as Outlook and The James White Review started to include more and more gay and lesbian short stories. Names like David Leavitt and Michael Cunningham are examples of gay writers that have "conquered" the market and are now unanimities among both straight and gay readers.

It seems that as in no other country, American gay literature has been capable of changing the cultural frame of the country in a short period of approximately twenty years.

Every year a great number of gay titles are published, and classic gay literature is constantly sold in specialized bookstores such as A Different Light in New York, Los Angeles and San Francisco, never getting out of print. The positive account of this durability of gay literature in White's view is that it gives writers the necessary time to find their audiences.

For all these reasons, it is impossible to deny that gay literature has entered the mainstream and is a lucrative part of it, both academically and commercially. Even so, still today some gay and lesbian critics believe that the mainstream has not "assimilated" gay literature completely and that political motivation is the starting point for some heterosexual critics to evaluate gay books. These critics review gay novels following conventional (heterosexual) parameters that can be applied to straight books, but when directed to a gay novel may be unsatisfactory and partial.

One must be aware that homosexuals cannot have a conventional life in our society. They have to "learn" and "reinvent" social codes in order to survive. It is then natural that these characteristics might be present in their literature, too. This is the reason why some people accuse gay literature of being uncontrolled and sentimental - lack of parameters to understand (or even to accept) it has caused these distorted opinions. As White has pointed out, a straight reader will not find subjects like divorce or a troubled marriage in a gay novel, simply because this is not what gay people experience in their everyday life.

Overburdened with all these distinct points of view, gay writers are split as to how they should present their homosexual characters. White divides gay writers in two categories: those who prefer to show their gay characters living within the social web with their relatives and heterosexual friends, like Leavitt and Cunningham; others who want to explore the singularity of homosexuality, or what it means to be a gay man living in a

straight society with its own (and different) codes, like Dennis Cooper and his marginal characters with a drive for sex and violence.

Thus, gay literature is in continual demand because people seldom ascribe it as an art form with a revolutionary character that has the obligation to fulfill some immediate needs (as the need to locate the AIDS crisis within a wider context of social changes or the necessity to remind people of the gay accomplishments that were undermined by the disease). As white has said:

> Perhaps no other body of literature is as subject to political pressures from within the community as gay fiction. Few writers in history have ever been "politically correct" (a notion that rapidly changes in any case), and there's no reason to imagine that gay writers will ever suit their readers, especially since that readership is splintered into ghettos within ghettos. (Out of the Closet 282)

Gay fiction is surrounded by contradictions: at the same time that it is a vigorous art form that demonstrates how literature can still be a lively and powerful vehicle in this technological end of the millennium, it is also an evidence that people still have difficulty in dealing with certain taboos, especially those related with human sexuality. It is this veiled restraint that makes gay fiction so difficult to be accepted, but also what makes it so interesting and challenging.

II- Gay Fiction and AIDS

When White came back to the States in the mid 1980s, the social panorama of the country had changed completely since 1979: with the emergence of the AIDS crisis, the achievements of gay men, gained through gay liberation in the late 1960's, had been partially undermined, especially since its first generation of writers had been almost completely erased.

Of the six writers that took part with White in a literary club (The Violet Quill), four were dead by the time of his return. White's editor Bill Whitehead and his friend David Kalstone, a literary critic, had also died. Many young gay writers as Tim Duglos, Richard Umans and John Fox were all victims of AIDS, too. In "Out of the Closet, on to the Bookshelf" White opens his heart: "The witnesses to my life, the people who had shared the references and sense of humor, were gone. The loss of all books they might have written remains incalculable" (277).

However, if in the early 1980's the AIDS crisis had almost extinguished a literary map right in its beginning, in the early 1990's it had (surprisingly) given a new purpose for the emergence of gay writing. In the same article, White calls the reader's attention to the irony of the situation: "At the very moment so many writers are threatened with extinction gay fiction is healthy and flourishing as never before" (277). For him, it is possible that the AIDS crisis has made America more aware of homosexuality or simply made gay life more perceptible. Whatever the cause, the result is that even heterosexual readers have become interested in reading books about this disturbing gay world, a world that in White's view "throws into relief so many of the tensions of American culture" (277).

Thus, gay fiction has become an important part of the American literary market, to the extent that today people have been discussing whether it should be taught at universities or not. Nevertheless, for the most part, gay writers are not interested in American mainstream; on the contrary, as White has put it, what interests contemporary gay writers is "the exploration of their most intimate feelings, the struggle to orient themselves in a world - the gay world - they're just beginning to map" (Out of the Closet 280).

Another argument presented by White is that perhaps gay fiction has achieved its present status due to a new position assumed by gay writers in the early 1990's in relation to AIDS - for him, through AIDS gay writers became "more reflective on the great questions of love, death, morality and identity, the very preoccupations that have always animated serious fiction and poetry" (277).

But back then, gay writers started to have distinct opinions on how they should approach the question of AIDS and its consequences for gay culture. According to White, some gay writers thought that they should write exclusively about AIDS and nothing else, due to the proportions the tragedy had achieved. Another group of writers thought that this obsession with the disease would confer a bad image to gay culture. Their argument was that it would reduce gay culture to "a single issue, one that once again equates homosexuality with a dire medical condition, [while] the true duty of gay writers is to remind readers of the wealth of gay accomplishments" (282). At any rate, for White this generation of writers is threatened (as is all humanity) and there is no way to avoid thinking and writing about it. In this same essay that dates from 1991, White himself assumes his condition of HIV positive and the accountancy he made gives the right extent of the problem: "Many who were robust a year ago were now dramatically thin or blind or

covered with lesions" (283). The fact is that no other problem has taken so much combined effort to be eradicated in the contemporary world than AIDS, and no other problem has aroused so many conflicts and prejudices among people, a form of segmentation where solidarity is often forgotten.

By the beginning of the 1990's, as White has stated, some gay writers such as Larry Kramer and Andrew Holleran started to put their fiction aside to adopt the form of essays, "as though only direct address [were] adequate to the crisis" (283). Nowadays in the States, people talk about **AIDS art**. Its main artists are Larry Kramer, Tony Kushner and Paul Monette, and their aim is to create an art form exclusively directed to the question of AIDS (generally plays) and nothing else. As for White, he states that this is not a genre he "particularly respects":

> Well, I've never particularly liked the idea of AIDS art. It always seemed to me as absurd as the idea of cancer art or tubercular art. Why should a disease have its own art form? I've always felt there was something fundamentally kitsch about the whole idea. (The Importance 124)

Judgments of value apart, what is noteworthy is that AIDS has become a constant motif in the arts, from fiction to cinema, from painting to theater. Nevertheless, in White's view things are going to be different in a near future once scientists believe that it may be possible to find if not the cure, at least a "normalization" of the disease. As white has stated:

> The prospect of the end of AIDS, or of a normalization of AIDS, is a good thing, not only in terms of people's lives, but also in terms of art. The whole medical side of it, which is now going to begin to sound very dated, will have to be rearranged so that the emphasis is on the psychological rapport between the healthy and the sick partner. (The Importance 124)

In the same interview, White claims that for him there is still "plenty of material having to do with AIDS, and as usual, the way to extract the material is to go deeper" (126). Perhaps this has been the true duty of gay fiction: to discuss any subject in its deepest and most honest way, no matter whether it is the AIDS crisis or the differences that distance (or approximate) straight and gay people. As White has stated: "Seldom has an elusive and indirect artistic form as fiction been required to serve so many urgent needs at once" (Out of the Closet 283).

III- Gay fiction and Queer Theory

In "An Oracle", one of the short stories of his book Skinned Alive (1995), White has the main character, Ray, travel to Greece to forget the death of his lover, George, an HIV positive. Standing on a beach in Xania, Ray is struck by a peasant "in black pants with a carved stick in his hand". The description continues:

> Ray, expensively muscular in his Valentino swim trunks, thought he was probably not much younger than this ancient peasant and suddenly his grief struck him as a costly gewgaw, beyond the means of the grievously hungry and hardworking world. Or maybe it was his grief that joined him to this peasant. (131)

Paradoxically, through his empathy with the shepherd, Ray is led to see himself as a "queen" from New York, and thus, as someone, or something, different. What strikes Ray about the shepherd (his black pants and the carved stick he holds) is that the shepherd's figure, when compared to his own, seems free from artifice.

What Ray suddenly recognizes in the shepherd is the artifice of his own figure when opposed to the peasant's positive and overt manliness. Ray's masculine traits (because he is a homosexual) have taken him a lot of effort; that "identity" which has been costly achieved and expensively mapped onto his body (perfected by the two hour work-out sessions at the gym and his "Valentino" swim trunks) suddenly strikes him as "constructed" because it remains forever beyond the means of a world in which he appears as something showy, but useless.

In this sense, Ray can only feel close to the shepherd because grief apparently enables him to join the shepherd outside the artifice of their identities: both Ray's homosexuality and the shepherd's manliness amount to mere constructs. Problematizing the

existence of a possible "gay" identity here, White, in fact, also questions other established assumptions such as the existence of a "masculine" identity, for example. Hence, it is possible to raise other questions concerning the story:

-- Why do the shepherd's traits appeal to Ray as "masculine"?

-- What makes the shepherd's manliness appear so unquestionable to Ray?

-- Is there really such a thing as a gay identity that immediately forbids us from questioning the shepherd's masculinity? That is, what is it that turns Ray into a "queer"? Is it because of his expensive "Valentino" swim trunks as opposed to the shepherd's simple black pants? The artifice of his muscular body as opposed to the peasant's naturalness?

In fact, what is being questioned here is whether "gay-ness" (and "straight-ness as well) are mere cultural constructs rather than "natural" attributions of individuals. The recent development of Gay and Lesbian Studies, one of the most fruitful approaches to the question of Gender in Cultural Studies, is an attempt to answer these questions and many others that, before Gay and Lesbian Studies were recognized, were only treated by Sexology and Psychoanalysis. According to the British critic Alan Sinfield, one of the most productive scholars within Gay and Lesbian Studies, from a psychoanalytical perspective, gay men and lesbians might be viewed as constantly trapped in their sexualities. Consequently, they would feel discouraged from attaining social change through political action (Cultural Politics 49).

Moreover, this assumption may function as a restriction on people's freedom. While psychoanalysis sees homosexuality from a "scientific" perspective (sometimes referring to it as a disease), gay and lesbian studies attempt to decompose and politicize these sexually-related labels that in most of the cases tend to demarcate people's behavior. As Roger

Horrocks argues in his book "Male Myths and Icons - Masculinity in Popular Culture"(1995),

> such concepts as heterosexuality and homosexuality have been deconstructed and historicized. Instead of being seen as absolute (even innate) categories, gay studies has been able to demonstrate their relativity. Thus, the concept of "homosexuality" and the "homosexual" is a comparatively recent one, as is the concept of heterosexuality itself. (10)

Sinfield argues that "Queer Studies" is the most suitable name for the discipline. According to him, people who are attracted to these courses believe that the term "Gay and Lesbian Studies" would not cope with the condition of social change that the discipline is proposing. In fact, the term "gay" gained currency only after the Stonewall Riot of June 1969 in New York.[2] Before this, "queer" was the derogatory term for the homosexual.

Thus, Queer Studies can be viewed as a considerably recent field of studies. In fact, the first works bringing a "theory" of action for the gay community date from the mid-1980's in the States. Within this short period, Queer Studies has not only strongly contributed to Gender Studies (to which it is indebted), but has also helped gay and lesbian subcultures to realize the importance of formulating a political strategy for social change, just as gay and lesbian writers of the 1970's had already realized.

It is important to remember that once the Academy welcomed gay and lesbian thinking, such thinking also functioned as an open door for gay fiction to be recognized. It can be argued that Queer theory, though eventually aiming at giving gays and lesbians political power, has as one of its first and most immediate results the recognition of gay fiction within the Academy, perhaps a first necessary step before political power is achieved. However, as mentioned before, because gay writers tend to eschew mainstream literature, the very nature of such political power is something still in the process of

making. As Sinfield argues, gays and lesbians "have to work harder on [their] own agendas - not so as to withdraw from mainstream society but to establish the terms on which [they] want to handle it" (The Wilde Century 206).

Gay writers have been trying to record the gay experience even before the advent of Queer theory. As White has shown in his article "The personal is Political: Queer fiction and Criticism" (1993), there was a time when gay writers were not certain of what they should do or write. The "post-Stonewall" generation have had a hard time in making their choices at a time when gay literature was simply ignored or blamed or banned from bookstores. White himself has felt this prejudice in the beginning of his career, as he argues:

> Perhaps for all writers, but certainly for us lesbian and gay writers in the 1970's, every artistic decision we made had its political aspect. Should we write gay fiction at all? At that time there was no known market for our work, few bookstores that would carry it, precious few editors who would even read our manuscripts. Literary friends told us that we were betraying our high calling by ghettoizing ourselves. After all, the argument ran, many great writers had been lesbian or gay, but Willa Cather and Virginia Woolf and Elizabeth Bishop wrote for all humanity and would have found any minority label demeaning. It would be absurd to call them lesbian writers, just as it would be grotesque to call E. M. Forster or Henry James gay writers. (396)

Perhaps the only way for gay writers to survive and get their literature going at that time was exactly by creating a ghetto first, and only then expanding their work to a broader audience. According to White, the phrase "the personal is political", a motto for women and gay writers during the 1970's, had great importance in the creation of an authentic feminist and gay literature. He says:

> We learned that what we'd endured and survived was not too subjective or peculiar to be of interest to readers. We also learned that what we'd lived through was not a neurosis in need of treatment but a shared experience that called for political action. (372)

According to John D'Emilio in his article "Gay Politics and Community in San Francisco Since World War II", what made it possible for gay and lesbian people to carry a liberation movement were the preceding movements that had taken place in America. Among these movements D'Emilio cites the black movement against discrimination, the new left, antiwar, and student movements, the counterculture, and, principally, the women's liberation movement. Inspired by all these groups that were seeking freedom and the right of speech, the Stonewall Riot inaugurated a new era for gay and lesbian politics in the States and also for gay fiction.

The result was that the 1970's were a time of pride and strength for gay politics in America. As D'Emilio has stated, gays and lesbians started to create their own organizations, as well as their own businesses, such as health clinics, coffeehouses, record companies, independent presses, etc, just as women have done. However, the damage of the AIDS epidemic in the early 1980's (the "gay cancer") came to invalidate many of the achievements that the Stonewall revolution had established, at the same time that it led to death many of its spokesmen -- gay writers. As a result, once more homosexuality came to be viewed as a disease or as an aberration that deserved treatment.

Today, when gay politics seems to have recovered its strength, mainly through activism, and Queer Theory has achieved the status of an academic discipline, gay writers are trying to recover this past marked by defeats and victories, retrocession and AIDS. It is in this sense that a literary work like White's *An Oracle* becomes covered with (historical) meaning: Ray's story is the story of thousands of gay men that went through AIDS and

experienced prejudice, loss and death. It is also an important part of the gay history that White (and many other gay writers) are recovering from this recent past.

Nevertheless, gay writers alone cannot formulate a political strategy of action for the future, once literature is not meant to *attend* to any matter but Art itself. Thus, Queer Theory plays a central role in this task -- as theorists are the ones capable of fashioning new ideas and concepts from what activists do. As Sinfield says,

> We need our activists, and, I believe, our intellectuals, and we need them to keep in touch with other people. Our best resources are numbers and commitment. To maximize these, we have to build a stronger subculture - more vigorous, intelligent and various - one in which many more of us can feel that we have both support and opportunity to contribute. We are entitled to the resources of central and local government, like other people, but we know we can't depend on that. (The Wilde Century 206)

Ultimately, as professor David Foster has argued, Queer Theory *is an effort to map difference*,[3] more precisely, the way in which this difference has been read until now in the western world. Foster argues that it is debatable that the work of Michel Foucault (a work based on 17th century France) can be applied to 20th-century America, but for him it is unquestionable that western societies have been based on the premise of homogenization and conformity (Foster cites the The Cold War, as an example). Hence, Queer Theory proposes a "problematization" of the homogenization and conformity of western society once it tries to find *difference* permeating the very ideology that supports it. In the following chapter I will be explaining how Cultural Materialism, as understood by Alan Sinfield, tries to deal with the issue of homogenization and conformity in the making of political difference.

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[1]White, Edmund. "Out of the Closet, onto the Bookshelf." in The Burning Library. London: Picador, 1995.

[2]The Stonewall inn was a gay bar in the Village and one of the places where the police used to go when they wanted to arrest homosexuals. In June 1969, many gay men and lesbians fought in the streets with the police to protest against police harassment. This event changed the whole course of gay history and served as the starting point for gay liberation.

[3]Foster, David. "Queer Theory and Gender Construction". UFSC, Florianópolis. 3 Mar. 1998.

Chapter I

I - Cultural Materialism and the Production of Subjectivity

According to Alan Sinfield, it was Raymond Williams who coined the term **Cultural Materialism**, a label for a trend within criticism that, similarly to materialist Feminism, is an outgrowth of Marxist ideology. In Cultural Politics - Queer Reading (1994), Sinfield argues that it is not possible to dissociate Art from Politics: the belief that culture is political is the main principle of such body of work. Thus, Sinfield defines Cultural Materialism as an

> analytic work which sees texts as inseparable from the conditions of their production and reception in history; as involved, necessarily, in the making of meanings which are always, finally, political meanings. Literary writing, like all cultural production, operates through an appeal for recognition: "The world is like *this*, isn't it?" it says in effect; and that has to be political. (Introduction viii)

A text, then, is read according to the political and historical circumstances in which it was produced -- it is a reflex of a political moment and so is the meaning derived from it. Moreover, Sinfield claims that individuals make sense of themselves and the world inside an "ongoing contest of representations, ... [that] come vested with varying degrees of authority" (Introduction viii). People who hold political power, like politicians or state leaders, frequently endorse such representations that are, in fact, generators of meanings (or ideologies), and also state apparatuses[1] to maintain societies. For Sinfield, when we come to life there is an ideological power already working, and such power is responsible for the formation of ideologies and subjectivities as well (the homogenization mentioned by Foster). Thus, Sinfield argues, what is central in Cultural Materialism is the creation of a *subcultural framework of interpretation* that may challenge the power structures (political systems, the church, education, etc.) and their

ruling ideology that often oppress people. Such power, at the same time that it operates through a homogenization of individuals, excludes those who do not conform to its prevalent patterns: gays, lesbians or blacks, for example. Hence, Sinfield states, the function of mainstream culture is to suppress differences. This is why *culture is political* -- whenever one tries to *represent* something, he/she needs to make a choice and this is a political act. In this sense, Cultural Materialism is an attempt to give voice to the subcultures that have been oppressed under the dominant discourse and its representations. Minority groups -- such as gay men and lesbians -- should, then, assess a politics of dissension towards the hostile heterosexist culture by finding contradictions permeating its very ideology, for the same dominant discourse that creates conformity and represses differences offers the elements to contradict itself.

In the task of finding difference (or dissidence, to use Sinfield's term), Cultural Materialism takes into account mainstream texts, such as Shakespeare's, for example, and offers subcultural readings of them, always considering the historical conditions in which they were produced. Its aim is to reveal "gaps" permeating the texture of the dominant discourse, i.e., deficient elements in the dominant discourse that fail to cohere with its own principles, or, as Sinfield calls them -- "faultline" stories. For him, mainstream culture often deals with those *unresolved issues* by "accommodating" them to its discourse, but sometimes this annexation is awkward (he also refers to it as *the recuperative manipulations of mainstream culture*) and cites the incorporation of writers such as Christopher Marlowe, Walt Whitman and Tennessee Williams to the canon as an example. It was necessary a certain effort by mainstream culture to "accommodate" those writers once their production escapes the acceptable heterosexual patterns. It is through these unstable issues that permeate the dominant discourse that Sinfield sees a possible challenge to the power structures and its representations (and the consequent

formation of totalising meanings that come to function as an excluding element in western societies).

In Cultural Politics - Queer Reading, Sinfield claims that "subcultural readings" are, then, essential elements to the formation of cultural politics. Thus, when he offers a subcultural approach to a canonical text, it is as if a break, a rupture has been established. By presenting an alternative reading of such texts he makes a split between what is mainstream (and dominant) and what is subordinate (or subcultural).To justify the dash in the title of his book and consequently his position as a critic, he writes: "[it] is not a slash, not a period, not a colon, not a comma, not a hyphen, not an arrow. It figures a break which is also a link, and a movement across" (Introduction x). The fact that male gayness is in the center of his discussion is a contingency: he adopts the point of view of a gay intellectual because for him intellectuals "should work in their own subcultural constituencies" (Introduction x). Summing up, Sinfield speaks from the position he has adopted among the many existing trends within literary criticism -- Cultural Materialism -- but he also speaks from the position of a gay intellectual that, through Queer Theory, tries to acknowledge his own subculture by investigating the possibility of dissidence within the dominant arrangements.

Because Sinfield is a literary critic, it is in literary texts that he will look for the necessary material for his dissident readings (though he argues that literature is only one of the countless places where culture is produced). Hence, Sinfield uses canonical texts of English Literature as a starting point, and reads them considering the principles that might have influenced their conception. For example, he reads Tennessee Williams's plays against the context of both the Cold War and the influence of Freudian ideas, especially those which speculated on the existence of a possible *latent homosexuality* in every individual. Tennessee Williams's *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (1955) is particularly

suited for such an approach because this association is perfectly justified from the observation of the relationship between Brick and Skipper. The characters claim an "innocent manly love" for each other, but in fact Brick's wife, Maggie, accuses Skipper of nurturing an *unconscious* desire for her husband. Brick argues that Maggie has named it dirty once she has blemished its innocent character (another sign of latency). However, as Sinfield points out, "[o]nce unconscious desires are on the agenda, no one is beyond suspicion" (45). For him, the works of Tennessee Williams

> show all too many signs of Cold War Freudian thinking, especially about American women. It made them out to be fragile, deluded, and dangerous; subject to hysterical sexual repression, which rendered them alternately frigid and nymphomaniac. (45)

As in every Cultural Materialist practice, the text is read concomitantly with its historical peculiarities, i.e., the historical and political conditions of America at the time Williams was writing his plays (and their possible influence in his work). Though in some plays Williams deals only with stereotypes, in others he "suggests more adventurous possibilities, offering the opportunity and the risk that dissident strategies often admit: disturbing certain orthodoxies at the expense of admitting other regressive implications" (45).

Similarly to his analysis of Williams's plays, Sinfield observes the historical conditions of sixteenth century England to answer a question raised some years ago in the English popular press: Was Shakespeare gay? According to him, the answer is "no"; it would be impossible to see Shakespeare as gay. Not because he could not have had any same-sex relationship, but more simply for the fact that at Shakespeare's time the concept "homosexuality" was inexistent (for Sinfield, Shakespeare could not have been "straight" either, following the same principle). Based on the work of Michel Foucault, especially on The History of Sexuality : An Introduction (1976), Sinfield argues that

such concept was first introduced in England during the nineteenth century, when a person who was discovered engaging in same-sex practices (their label for homosexuality at those times), came to be seen as a specific *type* of individual with a specialized sexual orientation.[2] In order to reinforce his argument, Sinfield also mentions Alan Bray's work Homosexuality in Renaissance England (1982) in which he argues that, in Shakespeare's time, the legal and medical discourses were unable to coin a term that could define "homosexuality". Thus, according to Bray, their labels for such practice - sodomy and buggery - were ill-defined and did not correlate to a special practice that only a specific type of person could join up. In fact, both terms were perceived within the notion of *debauchery*, a broader concept that could embody many kinds of "vices" that only disreputable people could engage in (qtd. in Sinfield 13). Sinfield's criticism derives from the fact that Bray has based his claim only on legal and ethical sources, consequently using documents that would hardly present a positive attitude toward same-sex passion. For Sinfield, Bray's fault was not to have looked for evidences of same-sex passion in sources like paintings or literary texts that, in many cases, present a more positive account on the matter. Thus, his opinion is that a critic should

> regard "literary" writing as a prestigious formation through which faultline stories circulate. As Bray now agrees, fictive writing has to be plausible, however obliquely; it must indicate something about the place of same-sex practices in the culture that promoted it." (Cultural Politics13)

Sinfield also speculates on the probable existence of something similar to our concept of the "homosexual" in early-modern Europe, mainly in upper class society where, according to him, there might have existed varieties that could promote such kind of behavior. Thus, if such concept had really existed it probably was not known by the majority of people, neither had it any relation to a specific pattern of sexuality,

subjectivity or gender. His conclusion is that even if there had been a certain kind of behavior in early-modern Europe that could be akin to our present notion of the homosexual, it was certainly unattainable or incomprehensible for most people at that time. The fact is that his speculation is meant to confront Foucault's principle that history is divided into epochs and that this division would characterize the modes of thought in each period as well as the occurrence of change. Hence, Sinfield argues that Foucault's position "makes his theories vulnerable to any scrap of empirical evidence showing ideas or behaviors occurring at the "wrong" time. However, it is a mistake to expect an even development, whereby one model characterizes an epoch and then is superseded by another" (Cultural Politics14).

Differently from Foucault, who believed that history was a sequence of distinct epochs, each with its own modes of thought, Sinfield attributes to history certain common features (if not concepts, at least similar ways of behavior) that would transit among different epochs. Thus, he suspects that what we call the "modern" concept of the homosexual (or gay identity) is not a completed concept yet, but has been in the process of making for a long time. Here he compares this continuous process of formation of the modern homosexual subject to the formation of the modern bourgeois subject, due to the similitude of both processes and the way they have been conducted through history. In fact, Sinfield claims that one can find traits of modern subjectivity even in Shakespeare and his contemporaries. Following this perspective, it is not possible to look at history as if it were a fragmented mosaic with no exchangeable elements. Even so, Sinfield argues that his analysis may reveal "not a moment of decisive change, but a continuous process" (Cultural Politics14). Consequently, he believes that the formation of a gay identity (or subjectivity) is a process we are still discovering. It would be a mistake to imagine that today we have a clear idea of what

might be "gay identity" and that every gay man experiences it (or that every heterosexual man has nothing to do with all that).

Thus, Cultural Materialism regards our subjectivity (and consequently our sexuality) as the effect of a cultural/ideological production with obvious relations to language and the dominant social arrangements; subjectivity also is seen as constructed in history. For Sinfield, a true cultural materialist practice will reject the notion that "reality, in plays or in the world, is adequately explained by reference to a fixed, autonomous, and self-determining core of individual being" (Faultlines 78). We are not an amalgam of self-determined sentiments and independent choices. Rather, we are social individuals and our very subjectivities (and the way we see the world) is the reflex of broader historical and political circumstances. With this assumption in mind, Sinfield (and many others) can theorize power structures and their mechanisms, regarding the individual as an extension of them. Henceforth, dissidence will be assessed by and through the assumption that the dominant ideology can produce subjectivities.

II- Cultural Materialism and Ideology

In the foreword to Political Shakespeare (1985), a book of essays on Cultural Materialism, Alan Sinfield and Jonathan Dollimore state that it was concomitantly with the divergences in British political life during the 1970's that literary criticism started to be questioned. Traditional assumptions about its values and goals were canvassed and lost their ground. Thus, in order to give new status to literary texts, the critics started to make use of the current and challenging discourses of the time (Structuralism, Feminism, Marxism, Psychoanalysis and Poststructuralism). But if on the one hand these discourses introduced a new dimension to literary criticism, on the other hand they served as a criterion to evoke profound questionings about the position and the nature of literature in our society.

If traditional practice in literature is dismantled through some of these discourses, others can not be viewed as so revolutionary as they would like to be seen. Thus, Sinfield and Dollimore attribute a list of the necessary elements for an effective literary practice. Both critics believe that

> a combination of historical context, theoretical method, political commitment and textual analysis offers the strongest challenge and has already contributed substantial work. Historical context undermines the transcendent significance traditionally accorded to the literary text and allows us to recover its histories; theoretical method detaches the text from immanent criticism which seeks only to reproduce it in its own terms; socialist and feminist commitment confronts the conservative categories in which most criticism has hitherto been conducted; textual analysis locates the critique of traditional approaches where it cannot be ignored. We call this 'Cultural Materialism'. (Introduction vii)

Moreover, the two critics argue that culture cannot be viewed as a simple reflection of the economic and political system, and that it cannot be dependent of it either. Thus, a cultural materialist practice will read literary texts considering their context of production, the political and economic systems in which they were produced

and the institutions that may generate culture, namely the church, education, political systems, etc. Cultural Materialism, as an analytic work, aspires to political commitment, as a way to oppose a social order "which exploits people on the grounds of race, gender and class". (Introduction viii)

In Cultural Politics - Queer Reading,Sinfield states that in the U.S. students (and professors) tend to confuse Cultural Materialism with New Historicism: they see the former as a variation of the latter. In fact, Cultural Materialism is a response to the political situation of Britain in the 1980's, a time marked mostly by Tatcher's pressure to effect profound economic changes in England. Cultural Materialism is also an outcome of British Marxism as well as of Cultural Studies. Moreover, he explains, a basic difference between the two lies in how Cultural Materialism addresses ideology, mainly as proposed by Louis Althusser in his essay "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses" (1969). Following the Marxist tradition, Althusser presents an effective definition of how social formations get constituted and how they survive: it is by reproducing the means of its production that they continue to exist. Thus, they need to reproduce labor power (the workers) and the existing relations of production. According to Althusser, it is by and through ideology that the State guarantees such reproduction. It follows that in ideology "men represent their real conditions of existence to themselves in an imaginary form... [it] is an imaginary relation to real relations" (166-67). Thus, in order to reproduce labor power, societies need to provide "a reproduction of submission to the ruling ideology for the workers, and a reproduction of the ability to manipulate the ruling ideology correctly for the agents of exploitation and repression" (133). Sinfield observes that, following Althusser's theory, it is not only by reproducing themselves materially that societies may endure -- they need to reproduce themselves ideologically, too. This is why they need to create ideological State apparatuses (ISAs) to keep this

system going (such as laws, churches, schools, political systems, etc.) and also repressive State apparatuses to punish the deviant ones (prisons, police and armies, for example).

Nevertheless, as Sinfield puts it, one cannot understand Althusser's theory in a "humanist manner"; i.e., with ideology being a fatalistic mechanism (or a strong influence) over the free individual. Sinfield affirms that for Althusser "there is no essential core of irrepressible humanity in the individual. He regards ideology as ultimately constitutive. We are born into it, come to consciousness within it; it is confirmed, continually, in the practices of everyday life" (Cultural Politics 23-24). Moreover, he says, for Althusser even the notion that we (as human beings) have a subjectivity is an ideologically constructed assumption.[3] This is how social formations get perpetuated: they *create* individuals that work independently of a stimulus, or in Althusser's words, people that "work by themselves" (Ideology 181). Individuals are, then, accomplice to the system insofar as they execute the function they are expected to do in the social order without much inquisition -- they work "by ideology" (Ideology 181). Consequently, the dominant ideology creates uncritical individuals that seldom question authority. Hence, Sinfield points to the pessimist implications of Althusser's theory: following his argument one can hardly see the possibility of dissidence once human subjectivity is constituted "within a language and social system that is already imbued with oppressive constructs of class, race, gender and sexuality...How, indeed, could Althusser see what he did?" (Cultural Politics 24). In fact, Sinfield's argument seems more an indication that he is aware of the dangers that may arise if one reads Althusser's theory in the "wrong" way rather than an open criticism to it.

It is on the relation of ideology and power that New Historicism intersects with Althusser's theory to focus on a social phenomenon that deserves attention -- a

phenomenon named "entrapment model" by Sinfield. This model claims that, in most of the cases, when one makes an attempt to challenge the system, in fact he/she is helping to maintain it. Sinfield argues that what happens is that those attempts end by acting as accomplices to the system, once they "help the dominant to assert and police the boundaries of the deviant and the permissible. In the entrapment model, any move seems to have been anticipated by the power system -- you only dig yourself in deeper" (Cultural Politics 24).

Foucault is named by him as "the theorist of entrapment": the French theorist claims in The History of Sexuality - An Introduction (1976) that one can hardly acknowledge resistance because power is everywhere in the social scale. The discourse which is meant to counter the power structures ends as a "reverse discourse" with no serious challenge. Sinfield observes that New Historicism has often used Foucault as a way of sustaining the idea that every transgression is already contained by the system, and that the system can use transgression in its own benefit by reinforcing its own boundaries through it.[4]

However, Sinfield states that though New Historicism had been effective in exposing the consequences of the entrapment model, it has never offered a way out. Differently from it, Althusser's theory and the entrapment model have inspired Cultural Materialism (and west-European Marxism) to develop a political attitude capable of "theorizing the power of dominant ideologies" (Cultural Politics 24). And, more significantly, to suggest an alternative to evade it by "theorizing the scope for dissidence" (Cultural Politics 24). The first step was given by Raymond Williams, especially in his later work "Base and Superstructure in Marxist Cultural theory" (1973). In this article Williams turn to Gramsci, especially to his work on hegemony, and argues that "hegemony is not singular; indeed that its own internal structures are highly

complex, and have continually to be renewed, recreated and defended; and by the same token, that they can be continuously challenged and in certain respects modified" (382-383). In order to maintain its hegemony, the dominant arrangements need always to perform diverse maneuvers, so that the "alternative" or "oppositional" cultures can be adjusted, contained or reincorporated. It follows that "the dominant arrangements, through their own contradictions, generate dissident perceptions."[5]

It is not surprising that many theorists have tried to formulate a theory on ideology, once it is decisive to the process of shaping social formations. It became thus necessary to formulate a theory that could address how ideology is produced and how it can be used as a power mechanism to contain differences in our society. Hence, the contribution to the question of ideology (among many others) given by names such as Althusser, Marcuse, Foucault and Williams was essential to the human sciences. It is from their considerations that contemporary theorists like Sinfield have acquired the necessary basis for their discussion and production. In Faultlines (1992), based on the work of Althusser, for example, Sinfield argues that it is by becoming common sense that ideology gets its strength (and consequently its effectiveness). He writes: "[i]deology makes sense for us -- of us -- because it is already proceeding when we arrive in the world, and we come to consciousness in its terms" (32). Thus, people "develop" a set of shared and common experiences that are passed on through time. It is when they find an echo in each others' stories that people can make good sense of the world and of themselves.

A crucial element in this process, according to Sinfield, is what he calls *the conditions of plausibility*, that is, certain "invisible rules" that confer credibility to the way we understand and interpret the world and that are shared by the majority of people. The conditions of plausibility "govern our understandings of the world and how to live

in it, thereby seeming to define the scope of feasible political change" (Faultlines 32). For Sinfield, most societies preserve their prevailing characteristics because people assume that the present state of things does not need to change -- things should be "more or less" the way they are. Eventually, it is people's consent which makes so many injustices possible and for so long. Hence, if we, as social individuals, perceive ourselves within a dominant discourse that generates subjectivities through ideological construction, then conformism and acquiescence is what hinders social improvement. According to Sinfield, it is difficult to break away from this circle once ideology is constantly produced in the social order, especially by the institutions that authenticate the dominant arrangements. The difficulty to organize a politics of resistance, then, is obstructed by the fact that people, as social beings, are brought to life (and "educated") within language -- the same language that is shared by the power structures that are the basis of social formations.

Thus, Cultural Materialism seeks in historical context to undermine the transcendent significance that traditional approaches attribute to literary texts -- practices which tend to obscure political and historical aspects that may be essential elements to the formation of a cultural politics directed to benefit minority groups. The humanist approach to literature tends to accord an inherent humanity and subjectivity to literary characters, in spite of the medium they live in. For Sinfield, when essentialist-humanist critics regard the individual as the origin of all truth and meaning in a literary text, they are incurring in an error. It follows that the practice of looking at us as essentially individuals (or 'subjects' as Althusser would say) can contribute to the effacement of processes of cultural production and, by the same token, induce people to think of themselves as being 'autonomous' and 'self-determining'. He says:

> It is not individuals but power structures that produce the system within which we live and think, and focusing upon the individual makes it hard to discern those structures; and if we discern them, hard to do much about them, since that would require collective action. (Faultlines 37)

Hence, collectivity plays an important part in what concerns political awareness. The active participation in a community, a subculture or a *milieu* is the required component that might promote the possibility of an effective dissident practice. A person alone cannot hope to develop political awareness only through his/her "individual, self-consciousness of class, race, nation, gender, or sexual orientation" (37). As Sinfield has put it, first one needs to get involved in a wider social context (mainly if it is a subordinate one) and share some common assumptions that will serve as a basis to generate 'plausible oppositional preoccupations'. Only then will it be possible to develop a 'plausible oppositional selfhood' (37).

Summing up, what we think, what we are is the product of a broader ideological formation. Our very subjectivities are cultural constructs and our assumptions about the way the world is -- the way we are -- reflect the dominant ideology we are immersed in since we come to life. Sinfield says: "[i]deology is not just a set of ideas; it is material practice, woven into the fabric of everyday life" (113). However, the same dominant discourse that produces subjectivities and ways of social behavior generates dissident perspectives through its own contradictions. But again, as in a vicious circle, the system can (re)incorporate dissidence through recuperative moves (as in the example of the incorporation of authors such as Walt Whitman and Tennessee Williams to the canon). Hence, textual analysis has proved to be an effective element in demonstrating how dissidence (or difference) can be incorporated to the system. As Sinfield observes: "dissidence operates, necessarily, with reference to dominant structures. It has to invoke those structures to oppose them, and therefore can always, ipso facto, be discovered

reinscribing that which it proposes to critique" (47). The intertwinement of resistance and control, the conditions of plausibility, and the intrinsic relation of power and language are perpetual challenges to subcultural approaches. Literature offers a fertile site for opposition: "Any position supposes its intrinsic *op*-position. All stories comprise within themselves the ghosts of the alternative stories they are trying to exclude" (Faultlines 47).

III - (Homo)sexuality as a cultural construct in Sinfield's The Wilde Century

The assumption that sexuality is not a "natural" quality of individuals but rather a social/ideological construction was first raised by the French philosopher Michel Foucault, mainly in the first volume of his groundbreaking trilogy entitled The History of Sexuality (1976). More than that, Foucault has approached sex as a central element in the exercise of power (and in the production of knowledge) in western societies since the classical age. Thus, his theories became an essential support for most critical discourses -- from Feminism to Marxism, from New Historicism to Cultural Materialism; Foucault has become an indispensable reference to literary criticism as well as to sexual politics.

In The History of Sexuality - An Introduction (1976), Foucault claims that the repressive society of the seventeenth century, far from repressing sex and everything that was related to it, in fact incited people's interest in it. This public interest in sex was manifested mainly through discourse. Thus, sex became a taboo, a matter of the state, and a medical assumption but -- most of all -- something to be discussed. Foucault observes that:

> "[c]alling sex by its name thereafter became more difficult and more costly. As if in order to gain mastery over it in reality, it had first been necessary to subjugate it at the level of language, control its free circulation in speech, expunge it from the things that were said, and extinguish the words that rendered it too visibly present". (17)

Consequently, the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were a time marked by a rigid moral code and a strong sexual repression. The outcome of such repression, in fact, proved to be a "discursive explosion" encompassing sex (either a discourse concerned in

repressing or denying sex, or a discourse concerned in speaking about it). Foucault observes that if heterosexual monogamy was taken as the "norm" to be followed, at the same time it was required to give constant explanation of its existence: "[t]he marriage relation was the most intense focus of constraints; it was spoken of more than anything else; more than any other relation, it was required to give a detailed accounting of itself" (37).

However, all other citizens -- such as mad men, women, criminals and sodomites -- were not required to give constant account of their sexual practices, but were a juridical matter. Their sexual practices were considered grave sins and would receive equal punishment by the law. Thus, practices "contrary to nature" such as adultery, rape, sodomy, debauchery (extramarital relations) or bestiality, despite the fact that they were considered abominable, received the same condemnation because they were simply crimes "against the law".

As time went by, regular sexuality lost people's interest. Although heterosexual monogamy was still seen as the sexual norm, less importance was given to it: "[t]he legitimate couple, with its regular sexuality, had a right to more discretion. It tended to function as a norm, one that was stricter, perhaps, but quieter" (38). This shift of interest, though, brought about to the public sphere illegitimate (or "peripheral") sexualities that were scarcely noticed before. Hence, the juridical system became more and more specialized in condemning different kinds of sexually-related faults or crimes. Every "unnatural" sexual practice, like obsessions or petty manias, started to receive their own forms of punishment, other than the laws applicable to crimes such as adultery or rape.

According to Foucault, it was within this new persecution of peripheral sexualities that a whole set of "perversions" -- homosexuality included -- started to be

classified (or constructed). Hence, a specification of different kinds of "abnormal" sexual practices became sort of a parameter to define the moral conduct of individuals: at this time the concept "homosexuality" was born. As Foucault has put it:

> The nineteenth-century homosexual became a personage, a past, a case history, and a childhood, in addition to being a type of life, a life form, and a morphology, with an indiscreet anatomy and possibly a mysterious physiology. Nothing that went into his total composition was unaffected by his sexuality. It was everywhere present in him: at the root of all his actions because it was their insidious and indefinitely active principle; written immodestly on his face and body because it was a secret that always gave itself away. (43)

Thus, when sexual activity between two persons of the same sex was seen apart from the category "sodomy", the "homosexual" appeared as a specific category of individuals. However, Foucault argues, homosexuality was more associated to "a certain quality of sexual sensibility" (43) than to the sexual act itself. Hence, the appearance (or the construction) of the homosexual as a "species" can be traced back to the nineteenth century.

Jeffrey Weeks also regards the contemporary notion of homosexuality as a social construction, its roots having been set in the changes occurred during the nineteenth century. However, he points out in Sex, Politics and Society (1981) that it is important (even essential) to differentiate homosexual behavior from homosexual roles, categorizations and identities. According to him, both anthropologists and sexologists agree that evidences of homosexual behavior can be found in different cultures since the nineteenth century (in England, the first legislation destined to punish homosexual behavior, the one referring to sodomy, dates from 1885). What becomes necessary, then, is to observe how these different cultures have responded to homosexual behavior through time and how they have attributed meaning to it. In western Christian society, for example, every homosexual experience was considered an abominable practice -- a 'sin against nature'-- something that could not be even mentioned among Christians.

Hence, Weeks observes, the social construction of meanings around this activity is what matters, and not the nature of the act. Homosexual behavior is, then, an irrefutable part of human sexuality; homosexual roles, categorizations and identities is what have been socially constructed.

Giving the necessary attention to Foucault's theory and to previous studies on homosexuality, Sinfield's The Wilde Century (1994) traces the probable process from which the modern notion of the homosexual (or the queer) might have been constructed. Hence, he makes use of historical events -- such as the Wilde trials in 1895 and the Victorian concept of effeminacy -- to demonstrate how modern notions about homosexuality are, in fact, the outcome of historical and political circumstances. For him, the legendary figure of Oscar Wilde may have functioned as a site for the emergence of a modern queer identity that has some of its characteristics regarded even today.

Hence, Sinfield's argument around the figure of Wilde is constructionist. It was possible to create a modern notion of the homosexual from Wilde -- his writings and his trials -- because sexualities (and here he is referring to both heterosexuality and homosexuality) are not unquestionable parts of the human essence, but rather a construction like many others that the social order can promote. Moreover, there is an element of circumstance that can particularize the way people regard their sexualities and also the influence of ideology. Thus, Sinfield claims that "[s]exual identity depends not on a deep-set self-hood (though it may feel otherwise), but on one's particular situation within the framework of understanding that makes certain, diverse, possibilities available; which makes some ideas plausible and others not" (11).

Sinfield argues that much of the disconcertment Wilde has caused on people had its roots on issues of 'effeminacy'. In the centuries before Wilde, effeminacy was

perceived as an eccentric behavior generally credited to upper class men (the dandies). An effeminate man was someone 'emotional' and self-indulgent who spent too much time with women but, contrary to the twentieth-century notion, was involved in cross-sex (heterosexual) relations. Hence, their concept of effeminacy was forged under the deployment of women: "Effeminacy is founded in misogyny. Certain manners and behaviors are stigmatized by associating them with 'the feminine' -- which is perceived as weak, ineffectual and unsuited for the world of affairs" (26). Effeminacy, then, was not only related to sexual orientation, but it addressed many other social and political concerns.

Before the trials of Oscar Wilde in 1895, effeminacy and same-sex passion (the Victorian term for homosexuality) did not correlate. A man who was considered effeminate was not necessarily involved in same-sex activities, though the possibility existed. It was a lack of manliness, an excessive attachment to women and the weakness generally attributed to them that were the characteristics people disapproved in an effeminate man. As Sinfield argues, through the concept of "effeminacy" nineteenth-century society could regulate sexuality -- at the same time that it punished the deviants, it kept sexual categories pure.

However, after the trials to which Wilde was submitted, effeminacy and same-sex passion came to be seen as correlate. At this point a dominant twentieth-century concept of homosexuality started to be constructed and applied to more and more people. The accusations that Wilde received included effeminacy, idleness, immorality, luxury, insouciance, decadence and aestheticism. These characteristics became widely associated with the figure of the homosexual in the following century. By the middle part of the twentieth century, the association of homosexuality and effeminacy became a set up assumption.

Among all the characteristics attributed to Wilde, aestheticism, or the cult of the beautiful, stands as the most frequent feature associated with the queer in our century -- people assume that homosexuals are fond of art (since art is regarded partly as a "feminine" characteristic in our society and homosexuals, by the same token, are considered part feminine, too). As Sinfield observes, since Romanticism people believe that there is something "feminine", (i.e. weak and sentimental) about literature, especially poetry. A combination of aestheticism and effeminacy, then, became a strong component in the image of the homosexual in our century.

My purpose in this research is to verify whether this twentieth-century model of the homosexual depicted by Sinfield can be located in contemporary gay literature, especially Edmund White's fiction, or if it has suffered changes with the passing of time. For that reason, I will be analyzing the process through which White goes -- as a gay writer -- in constructing the homosexual identity of his characters and in which point those characters might differ from what has been presented until now in terms of queer stereotypes. In fact, it is possible to observe some elements of the constructionist argument in what concerns the homosexual identity of White's characters, mainly in his autobiographical novel A Boy's Own Story (1982). The novel tells the story of a boy's coming out during the fifties in America and his difficulties to cope with the discovery of his supposed homosexuality. Hence, he tries diverse mechanisms and processes, from obsessive taste to literature to optimism in psychoanalysis, as a way to understand (and later to form) his homosexual nature.

Nevertheless, if some of White's characters reaffirm the twentieth-century queer model in some points, basically in what regards effeminacy and aestheticism, others point to a new direction in representing the male homosexual -- one that has been required to adapt to the political and social changes of the contemporary world (World

War II or the biggest sexual epidemic of the century, for example). Historical events, such as the AIDS crisis and the new political conservatism it has brought to America in the early eighties, have changed not only literary representations of male homosexuality, but also the course of gay politics and consciousness. Aware of all these changes, White establishes in his fiction different patterns and ways of looking at male homosexuality -- that is, he looks at it from inside, as someone who has lived himself the stories he is telling (and it is in this sense that his fiction becomes covered with significance).

What I want to do is to find out what are the elements that compose this new contemporary image of the homosexual and contrast it with the stereotype that, according to Sinfield, came to being after the Wilde trials in the late nineteenth- century. My purpose is to verify the extension of the changes that the concept "homosexuality" has suffered in one hundred years of existence and also see its relation with the heterosexual norm nowadays.[6] As a supporting element, I will be using Sinfield's theory and Cultural Materialist principles to guide and direct this investigation. Thus, the historical context in which the stories take place and its corresponding political moment represent a crucial element in the analysis of White's representations of the male homosexual. Finally, I uphold Weeks' belief that "[a] study of homosexuality is therefore essential, both because of its intrinsic interest and because of the light it throws on the wider regulation of sexuality, the development of sexual categorization, and the range of possible sexual identities" (Sex, Politics 97). Based on what Sinfield has said about the nature and the prestige attributed to literature in our society (and the importance it plays in showing the place of homosexuality in the culture that has promoted it), I believe that White's fiction is a rich source of knowledge to develop this research.

IV - A gay canon? (A parenthesis)

The task of producing a reading of White's fiction based on the theory proposed by Sinfield can bring about the problem of adequacy: the former would not be "adequate" to the proposals of the latter. While Sinfield starts from the canonical texts of English literature to promote dissident readings, White's fiction can never be thought of as canonical. Once White proclaims himself as a "gay writer" writing "gay fiction" he becomes dissident from the start. Though his fiction can not be considered canonical, to some extent it has already been assimilated by the mainstream, even if that means "mainstream gay fiction". So, one asks, what is the point of bringing Sinfield's theory to texts which do not represent the accepted universals?

Obviously, this is a misconception and offers only a narrow view of the works in question. Contrary to all the evidence above, the production of these two authors, despite their different backgrounds, cannot be viewed as disparate but alike and complementary. In fact, Sinfield himself has stated that "Cultural Materialism may and should be applied to all cultural phenomena."[7] Moreover, both authors affirm that literature would benefit if the notion of a canon, or of literature as being a list of inclusions and exclusions, could be dismantled: in their view literature is much more than this simplistic equation.

In fact, this is a regular practice in Cultural Studies (of which Queer Studies can be thought of as an offspring). All frontiers must be abolished; critics should demolish pre-established judgments of value based only on canonical models. In an essay called

"The Personal is political: Queer Fiction and Criticism" (1994), Edmund White calls attention to the problems that may arise once one accepts the notion of a canon. He says:

> The notion of a canon implies that we belong to something called Western Civilization that is built on a small sacred library and that that library is eternal and universal and important in the way no individual reader can ever be. I would say that every part of such assumption is misguided. The United States is no more Western than Eastern, no more English than Spanish, no more Christian than Jewish or Buddhist. We must accept the full implication of pluri-culturalism. We must no longer attempt to introduce a few gay titles or a Chinese-American title into a canon that begins with Aristotle and Plato or the Bible. Even the hierarchy inherent in the concept of a canon must be jettisoned. (376)

In Cultural politics - Queer Reading (1994), Sinfield observes that the advent of the literature produced by subordinated groups (namely Women's literature and Black literature) is a recent episode in Western literary culture. With the aim of opposing mainstream culture and the totalising idea of a list of a few selected books that might be taken as the core of "Western Literature in English", these groups started to demand that their subcultures should be validated as well -- the same happening to gay literature. Once the importance of these "alternative" forms of literature has been acknowledged, one must not forget what the canon still represents. Sinfield states that one cannot simply ignore the canon, that would be a mistake. For him "[s]imply to set aside mainstream culture would be to leave much of its power unchallenged" (Introduction ix). Eventually these positions are a summary of what Queer Theory is about: not the introduction of another theory to the array of theories available (not the introduction of a few gay writers to the canon), but to defy the very notion that something must be first categorized at all to become understandable.

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[1]The expression "state apparatuses" was coined by Louis Althusser in his essay "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses", in Althusser, *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, trans. Ben Brewster (London: New Left Books, 1971). This essay will be further explored later.

[2]The question of homosexuality as seen as a cultural construct is deeply explored in Sinfield's book The Wilde Century: Effeminacy, Oscar Wilde and the Queer Moment. London: Cassel, 1994. This book will be further analyzed on this research as it proceeds.

[3]Differently from Althusser, Herbert Marcuse, as a humanistic Marxist, claims in *An Essay on Liberation* (1969) that we all have an inherent humanity that only needs liberation.

[4]Alan Sinfield, e-mail of the author, 20 May 1998.

It is necessary to mention here that Sinfield has made a "partial reading of Foucault", i.e. he does not intend to offer a definitive reading of Foucault's theories, but an account of it as it is perceived in Cultural Materialism.

[5]Alan Sinfield, e-mail of the author, 7 May 1998.

[6]David Halperin argues in One Hundred Years of Homosexuality (London: Routledge, 1990) that the concept "homo-sexuality" was first introduced in the English language by Charles Gilbert Chaddock in 1892 (in fact, it is the Oxford English Dictionary that credits Chaddock with having invented the term. However, the word "homosexuality" appeared for the first time in the OED only in 1976). As Halperin states "Before 1892 there was no homosexuality, only sexual inversion" (p.15).

[7]Alan Sinfield, e-mail of the author, 20 May 1998.

Chapter II

I - A Boy's Own Story -- Setting the historical and political moment: the America of the 1950's

In America Past and Present, Robert Divine et al consider The Cold War as the main political episode in the United States during the 1950's. A result of the disagreements between the U.S. and the Soviet Union over issues such as the division of Europe after World War II, postwar economic aid and the atomic bomb, the Cold War installed a period of fear and unrest over American life. Its implications were so serious that as early as 1953, the year democrat president Truman left office, the Cold War achieved global proportions -- it had reached even Asia. The United States and the Soviet Union fought over the division of the Korean territory from 1950 to 1953. The U.S. kept firmly in its goal of controlling Soviet world expansion and national interests prevented the two superpowers from finding a diplomatic term for the conflict.

The early 1950's in America were marked by U.S. senator Joseph R. McCarthy's "witch hunt" -- a national campaign to search for Communists in the State Department in a series of trials that soon came to be known as "McCarthyism". His exaggerated fear of a possible Communist conspiracy inside the U.S. government lasted for more than four years,

without any substantial evidence being found. By 1954, two years after Republican president Dwight D. Eisenhower was elected, senator McCarthy was brought down. At any rate, his accusations only helped to increase the insecurity of the American people, who already believed in the existence of vast Russian espionage activity and a veiled Communist plot for world domination. The disagreement between the United States and the Soviet Union also reached unthinkable areas, such as space. The Space Race indicated the complete manifestation of the rivalry between the two superpowers which saw in it an important chance of gaining advantage over "the enemy". In 1957 the Soviets sent their first satellite, the Sputnik, into orbit around the globe, creating hysteria in America which saw in the extraordinary Soviet enterprise a threat to national security as well as to the earlier American supremacy in the conflict. Pulled forward by those anxieties, Americans created in 1958 the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) and five years later the first American satellite was launched. Rivalry and national interests, intermingled with people's insecurity, helped to increase the notion that the country which "conquered" space first, had the power to win over the enemy.

However, the 1950's were a time of wealth and economic prosperity, too. Contrary to the economic difficulties of the Great Depression in the 1930's, a postwar economic boom made the fifties a time of abundance and strong consumerism. Along with the new economic status came industrial expansion, the suburbs and an increasing birth rate. In fact, the most notable social phenomenon of postwar America was the mass flight to the suburbs. People wanted to leave crowded cities such as New York and Chicago to raise their children because the suburbs were portrayed as the ideal environment for a better life, away from the poverty-stricken metropolitan areas. White middle class American families, thus

separated from the racial melting pot of the big metropolitan areas, were able to enjoy the prosperity of economic abundance.

Nevertheless, not everyone was satisfied with the conformity and dullness that the economic wealth had cast upon Suburban America: in the second half of the fifties a group of poets called "the beats" rebelled against this torpor left on white middle class Americans. In 1957 Jack Kerouac published On the Road, a novel that criticized the apparent flawless surface produced by white middle class America. In fact, self-criticism was an important feature of the 1950's. People called for reforms on the "progressive" educational system. They wanted more emphasis on traditional academic subjects and saw in the Soviet educational advances either a threat or a model to be followed. Also, the 1950's were the decade in which Psychoanalysis and Sociology grew enormously in status. Both disciplines pledged on the importance of the nuclear family as the basis of society and of those characteristics they labeled "American values"[1] -- which represented a set of "essential qualities" that would be the prerequisite to develop real American citizens and that needed to be protected against Communist intervention.

In this respect, as Sinfield observes, homosexuality became a threat to these American values because it went against binary sexuality and the formation of nuclear families. More than that, during the Cold War, homosexuality was transformed into a crime -- one that needed to be severely punished. As Sinfield argues:

> The Cold War made it specially necessary to control sexual dissidence for, even more than battle conditions, it depended on the ideological -- spiritual, moral -- determination of U.S. people. They had to establish and maintain the superiority of "the American way of life" over Communism. Un-Americans were dismissed from jobs in government, municipalities, business, education, and medicine, often on suspicion and without appeal. (...) Communists seemed to threaten military and

> political security; queers (I use the word of the time) undermined family values and the frontier vision of the manly man. (Cultural Politics 41)

What is interesting to note is the precise nature of the meaning attributed to homosexuality during the Cold War. United States authorities, worried about controlling any possible attempts of Communist activity, started to doubt and suspect every citizen that might present an abnormal behavior or conduct. Hence, Sinfield argues "[it] was only a small step to the thought that anyone who didn't fit in was implicitly queer" (Cultural Politics 42). Furthermore, Freud's theory about *latency* (which relied on the belief that every individual might have a predisposition toward bisexuality when a child) had a strong impact over such state of affairs: no one wanted to be associated with *latent* homosexuality -- it would be the same as being labeled "Un-American."

As for women, the fifties did not represent a time of great achievements and social conquest: women who had held productive positions in the work force during World War II had to return home to continue their lives as mothers, wives and sisters. The nuclear family with its pre-established roles left no room for women to develop full citizenship. In the second half of the decade, the advent of the first contraceptive pill in 1956 and the growing number of wives willing to help maintain their families prepared the ground for the great revolution of Feminism in the early 1960's.

On the other side of middle class white America, Black activism and their struggle over civil rights was beginning to emerge. Rev. Martin Luther King had found a way to incite African Americans to protest vehemently against discrimination using pacific means: for example, in 1955 he lead a campaign to boycott buses for segregated seating in Montgomery, Alabama (black people were not allowed to ride on the front seats). A year

later, the Supreme Court considered the Alabama segregated-seating law unconstitutional -- the civil rights movement had found in Rev. Luther King an eloquent leader. By the mid 1960's, segregation had decreased considerably in America, though the gains of the Civil Rights Movement had also provoked more social conflicts and tension, especially in the South where discrimination was stronger than ever before.

The fifties were a time of contrasts and uncertainty: important social changes and achievements coexisted with prejudice, ignorance and national interests. But, most of all, it was a time marked by fear of Communism and Soviet expansion. David Mauk and John Oakland, in American Civilization (1995), argue that the U.S. believed that its "mission" (the most important until then) was to set the world free of Communism. To achieve this, "the nation had to quadruple its military budget so that it could take the initiative in containing Communism" (195). At the end of the millennium, anyone can tell, this "mission" of saving the world from whatever appears to be Un-American is still on the agenda of the U.S. government: they still would like to change the world, so that it can become more "American".

II- "Would I become a queer and never, never be like other people?"

At the very beginning of Edmund White's A Boy's Own Story the main character -- the narrator of the novel -- makes an observation that will affect the whole course of the story he is recalling. The novel begins with his vivid recollection of a boat ride taken with his father and two other boys at the age of fifteen. The clear tone of this invocation makes the reader wonder whether the narrator is simply recalling his childhood or attempting to make sense of its experiences by narrating them. For the words he tells are the ones that help him construct an identity for himself in the present and to overcome what he has endured as a boy:

> Unlike my idols I couldn't play tennis or baseball or swim freestyle. My sports were volleyball and Ping-Pong, my only stroke the sidestroke. *I was a sissy.* My hands were always in the air. In eighth grade I had appeared in the class pageant. We all wore togas and marched solemnly in to a record of Schubert's *Unfinished.* My sister couldn't wait to tell me I had been the only boy who'd sat not cross-legged on the gym floor but resting on one hand and hip like the White Rock girl. (9 my italics)

The sheer clarity with which the narrator calls himself a "sissy"[2] is opposed to the tone used to describe the boat ride and has a meaning: up to this point, in which the narrator uses to word "sissy" to address himself, he is recalling his childhood with dreamlike traits. This first impression (of unreality?) given by an excessive amount of information and descriptions (about himself, his father, the two boys, their house and their behavior toward each other) is suddenly broken by the statement that shakes the reader's mind out of the "illusion" created so far: "*I was a sissy*".

Before this moment, there is very little that tells him apart from Kevin, one of the other "frank" boys riding in the boat. Apart from his shyness, virtually nothing distinguishes him from the other boys. The moment he acknowledges himself as a "sissy" he makes this

distinction work both for himself (in the narrative) and for us readers, who now begin to recognize the voice speaking.

Following this remark, the narrator makes reference to a quiz destined to establish and eventually "test" the extension of one's masculinity. The quiz was composed of three basic questions, all of them making allusion to common gestures of everyday life:

> "(1) Look at your nails (a girl extends her fingers, a boy cups his in his upturned palm); (2) Look up (a girl lifts just her eyes, a boy throws back his whole head); (3) Light a match (a girl strikes away from her body, a boy toward -- or perhaps the reverse, I can't recall) (9).

Before the narrator describes these three questions, he tells us that he has failed in all of them. The discovery of his failure generates a feeling that will pervade the whole novel: he was unworthy, his behavior was improper, he was not "masculine" enough and, thus, he was "inferior."

After the narrator applies the word "sissy" to describe himself, he realizes for the first time in the novel how different he and Kevin can actually be: Kevin has good manners which the narrator associates with pure training; Kevin is not timid, and, unlike the narrator himself, is not given to irony and daydreaming. Kevin, he continues, simply wanted to be noticed, simply wanted to win. As a consequence, all these socially inherited traits form the core of Kevin's identity. He becomes a common (and therefore, masculine) boy to the narrator's eyes: "[he] hadn't invented another life; this one seemed good enough" (10). In opposition to Kevin's behavior, the narrator (who is never given a name) opted for living in a parallel world which he creates to fit a personality that is incompatible with the social environment he lives in. For him the irony, "the superior smirks", the "fits of longing "and daydreaming (10), are all devices he uses to escape from a world in which only frank,

masculine boys like Kevin are more likely to succeed. "Masculinity" is both the characteristic he lacks and longs for. Guilt and shame, the two main feelings pervading all these experiences, are associated with his lack of more explicitly masculine traits.

The discovery of his sexuality -- early in his childhood and adolescence -- and the recognition of what it represented socially makes it clear how this difference could interfere in the course of his whole life. This knowledge makes him think of himself as "an embarrassment." Homosexuality approaches him as a ghost, a creeping monster ready to impose its will on him. Even if he succeeded in overcoming, forgetting, or denying his condition, people would constantly and overtly remind him of it, as if such condition could be read all over his body. For example, his friend Tommy is told by another boy called Harold that he must be alert every time he invites the narrator to stay over -- Harold affirms that the narrator would try to seduce him during his sleep. Tommy lets the narrator stay over for some days, and once the accusation does not come true the narrator is allowed to stay at Tommy's house any time he wants to. It is homosexuality that corrupts his friendship with Tommy: "[the] medical smell, that Lysol smell of homosexuality, was staining the air again...I longed to open the window, to go for an hour and come back to a room free of that odor, the smell of shame" (117-18). Tommy feels the necessity to test whether the narrator is a "sissy" or not before giving him his friendship -- the narrator needs to lie and deny it in order to secure their friendship.

From the moment the narrator realizes his behavior is "abnormal" he tries diverse mechanisms to overcome his "homosexual tendencies." As a boy he seeks shelter in isolation and literature: his friends are books. Literature is present all over the narrative, but it is during his childhood that it assumes the status of an escape: "[e]arly on, I had

recognized that books pictured another life, one quite foreign to mine...I saw literature as a fantasy, no less absorbing for all its irrelevance -- a parallel life, as dreams shadow waking but never intersect it" (41). Though literature offers a solace for his grief and loneliness, it cannot efface the picture he has of himself (and that he is forced to assume): that he is an embarrassment to his family and to himself. As adolescence approaches, he feels the necessity to seek a "male role model" in a boarding school (as we will see later). Now isolation and literature are insufficient devices to control his homosexual tendencies. As the narrator grows older he becomes "frightened by the tenacity of [his] homosexual yearnings" (125). Thus, this time it is in Psychoanalysis that he looks for a mechanism that can help him overcome his "problem" with homosexuality: "...I was turning to a psychoanalyst for help. I wanted to overcome this thing I was becoming and was in danger soon of being, the homosexual, as though that designation were the mold in which the water was freezing..." (169). All his fear rests in the task of avoiding this designation -- he wants to escape from the categorization "homosexual." This label is what frightens him, the fear of being framed, classified, categorized. As he says "I see now what I wanted was to be loved by men and to love them back but not to be a homosexual" (169).

III - Communists, queers and sinners

Edmund White calls A Boy's Own Story his "coming-out" novel. In fact, the novel recuperates much of White's own experiences as a boy and his internal struggle to "come out" (accept his homosexuality). As he states in the foreword to the novel, "in A Boy's Own Story I wanted to trace it out in detail through the life of an individual, one I knew intimately." That means, we are dealing with a fiction that has some autobiographical content. The main character of the novel, at the same time in which he tries to love a man and to be loved by him, wants desperately to escape from the categorization that such act implies. He does not want to "become" a homosexual -- he wants to be "cured" from it (though he does not give up his longing for men).

The novel displays several definitions of what a queer or a sissy (the terminology of the time) might be. It follows that these definitions must be seen as the product of the context in which the action takes place. Following Sinfield's procedure, we have to look at the novel considering its political and historical background because, when combined, these elements can give us the exact measure of the origin of such definitions and their implication within the narrative. Thus, what most notably informs people's "conceptions"[3] about homosexuality in the novel is the ideology of the Cold War period.

In a clear reflex of such "conceptions" the narrator loses the only friends he can relate to. At the age of eleven, he meets Marylin and Fred, the clerk and the owner of a bookshop near the hotel where -- his parents having recently divorced -- the narrator moves in with his mother and sister. Marylin and Fred fascinate him: she is "theatrical" and "intriguing", his "prematurely gray and acne-pitted skin" (87) along with his knowledge

gives the narrator "no way of judging him, only of gazing at him with awe" (87). This friendship, though, does not last long. The narrator's mother -- following the advice given by some old ladies at the hotel who notice the boys bond with the couple -- forbids him from visiting the bookshop. Fred and Marylin are not "decent" companionship for a kid. Years later, he and Marylin meet again; as a grown-up he is able to recognize the actual bond that both united them and severed their friendship in the past:

> One afternoon over manhattans I confessed to Marylin I was gay and she told me she was, too, and that she and Fred had known all along that I would be, even when I was eleven.
> "And Fred? was he gay?"
> "Oh yes. Didn't you know? I thought we all knew about each other," Marylin said as she redrew her eyes in the compact mirror.
> "Well, I knew you both liked me and that I felt good with you, better than with most grown-ups."
> "Then why did you stop coming by the shop? Waiter, another round."
> "Because my mother told me I couldn't see you anymore. The old ladies in our hotel told my mother that you and Fred were Communists and living in sin."
> Marylin laughed and laughed. "Of course the truth is we're both Catholics and gay and never touched each other. Perhaps those ladies even knew the truth but - but" - shriek of laughter - "assumed that communism and living in sin, that those two things equaled being gay." (89)

Marylin's reaction toward the "gossip" is revealing: her perplexity comes from the fact that -- under the old ladies' eyes -- the truth, that Marylin and Fred are "gay", is masked by these facts: they were always together but were not married, they were always reading books, they dressed in weird clothes and made friends with an eleven-year-old boy. It is the combination of all these elements that makes the old ladies regard them as Communists who live in sin (i.e. they have sex but are not married). Cold War U.S. ideology lies behind this distorted judgment. In fact, Marylin and Fred are taken as "Un-Americans" -- that is, Communists and living in sin (though she affirms they are simply Catholic and gay). Once they do not fit the traditional patterns of the nuclear family, they can be anything and

remain against the accepted social norm of their time -- they are against the "American values" no matter what the truth is.

The extent to which these social norms of conduct become relevant is made apparent when the narrator begins to see his own homosexuality as a sickness, an abnormality that can be "cured" through Psychoanalysis, the latest trend in the 50s America. Seen from this angle, queers are not normal people, they are sick and *different*. So the narrator asks himself: "[w]ould I become a queer and never, never be like other people?" (107). In addition to that, what disturbs him most about homosexuality is the "medical smell" he -- influenced by Freudian Psychoanalysis -- associates with homosexuality. Thus, the narrator is "led" to believe in the version which associates homosexuality with sickness.

According to Edmund White himself in his article "The Gay Philosopher" (1969), there are (at least) three possible metaphors commonly associated with homosexuality. These metaphors are: 1) the Psychoanalytic/Freudian version (homosexuality as a sickness); 2) the religious and juridical version (homosexuality as sin or crime); and 3) the social version (which sees homosexuals as belonging to a minority group). For White one needs to "choose" which version explains better his/her condition. Homosexuals, then, should "try to make it as clear and explicit as possible, for it undoubtedly influences his behavior in important ways" (7). Perhaps this fact may explain the narrator's anxiety and duplicity throughout the narrative of A Boy's Own Story. Because it is set in the 1950's America, when the Psychoanalytic/Freudian version of homosexuality was the "norm", the narrator grasps more firmly the metaphor of the "sick person" to explain his behavior. There is a whole set of social apparatuses -- sealed by psychoanalytic and sociological discourses -- which prevent him from disengaging his condition from the medical conceptualization.

Moreover, in the narrator's discourse one perceives an influence of Freudian ideas about *latency* so prominent during the 1950's. Every individual, especially children, has a homosexual component that can either disappear or persist. The narrator, willing to explain and justify his "tendencies", tries to believe that his homosexuality is just a temporary stage -- some late residue of his childhood -- a condition that will be changed naturally as he grows up:

> I'd heard that boys passed through a stage of homosexuality, that this stage was normal, nearly universal -- then that must be what was happening to me. A stage. A prolonged stage. Soon enough this stage would revolve, and after Tom's bedroom vanished, on would trundle white organdy, blue ribbons, a smiling girl opening her arms... But that would come later. As for now, I could continue to look as long as I liked into Tom's eyes...(118).

Freud believed that this predisposition toward homosexuality existing in every child was just an initial stage (though he says this predisposition can continue in a dormant state he called *latency*). In the narrator's case, this is not just an initial disposition but a "prolonged stage" not in a latent condition (once he has sexual experiences with men along the narrative). He accepts the notion that he is passing through a "stage" of homosexuality, and that, at some point, this stage might end. However, he uses the theory to his advantage when he says "that would come later. As for now I could continue to look as long as I liked into Tom's eyes" (118). He wishes his homosexual stage could end, but it can be later -- for the moment he only wants to look at Tom's eyes. He is ready to give up his homosexuality, not his love for Tom.

As a matter of fact, this duplicity is a main trait of the narrator's personality, and it pervades his thoughts and actions throughout the story. His "homosexual tendencies" are at odds with the milieu he has grown up in. The narrator -- raised to be the product of a typical

white middle class American family of the 50s -- is "trained" to profess the same ideology that lies behind such formation, and to share the same privileges but also to be subjected to its prohibitions. Nevertheless, his values and behavior are constantly challenged by the ideology of his social class. His relation with his father is punctuated by those differences, money is the only element that links them both. The narrator's father, who wants him to become a man, thinks that

> manliness [is] not discussible, but had it been, it would have included a good business suit, ambition, paying one's bills on time, enough knowledge of baseball to hand out like tips at the barbershop, a residual but never foolhardy degree of courage, and an unbreachable reserve. (147)

For his father, one must "learn the value of a dollar" (35) in order to be a man. Masculinity and money are correlatives: one depends on the other. Every time the narrator describes his family, money is in evidence -- its presence overwhelming in their lives, a means to measure one's value. What the narrator is taught by his parents is that he needs to be a man, and the (only) way to become a man is by making enough money. He says: "[in] a sense all of our daddy's dollars were casters on which the furniture of our lives glided noiselessly" (67).

Thus, his dilemma -- and the main cause of his duplicity -- is symptomatic: the narrator is constantly torn between the tension of the ideals of the social class he belongs to and his "homosexual tendencies." His sexual impulses -- his queerness -- make it impossible for him to share, or even to take part in the social advantages his white middle class background grants him. For, if manliness equals money, his "lack" of manliness would most certainly compromise his accomplishments and his performance in this white middle class environment.

The economic boom that white middle class Americans experienced during the 1950's serves as the landscape for the narrative of A Boy's Own Story. The narrator's father, a successful businessman, and the main representative of white middle class America in the story, sees money as the most valuable possession one can have. As the narrator says, for his father money was "the air superior people needed to breathe; wealth and superiority coincided, though when he said someone was from a 'good' family, he meant rich first and secondarily respectable or virtuous" (20). This society is the same that stimulated consumerism, praised manliness (which is associated with money), despised queers (they are Communists), patronized women (who were, in most of the cases, housewives), and discriminated against "niggers" (they are inferior).

Racial discrimination, so characteristic of the 50s America, is a recurring motif in the novel. Black people are always present in the narrative as maids and handymen, like Blanche and Charles, who work at the narrator's house. These people are treated with contempt, especially by his father: "You've been listening to Charles again. That nigger just talks nonsense" (47), or "I swear I'll kill that goddamn ape if he scratches my fender" (48). However, even being a white middle class boy growing up in this unfair and prejudicial society, the narrator has a different opinion about black people -- one that denotes sympathy:

> An old car full of black maids sputtered past. It was Wednesday evening; tomorrow was their day off...Most of the time they were exiled, dispersed into the alien population; only once a week did the authorities allow the tribe to reconvene. They were exuberant people forced to douse their merry flames and maintain just the palest pilot light. At the moment I really believed I, too, was exuberant and merry by nature, had I the chance to show it. (31)

His identification is born from the fact that he -- like the blacks -- is discriminated against in society. Not for the color of his skin, but for his "sissy ways" (43). Like black people who are subjected to the "authorities" and do not even have the freedom to come and go as they wish, he is himself subjected to the disapproval of his social class, personified in the figure of his father. His "difference" excludes him from that society, at the same time that it distances him from his father: their natures are incompatible. Wondering about the reasons why his father does not like him (he thinks so), the narrator asks: would it be because I am "drawn to art rather business, to people rather than to things, to men rather than to women... books rather than sports, sentiments not responsibilities, love not money?" (172). The first characteristics in the list are a summary of his "true self" -- the second ones, representing his father's opinion about masculinity, are, in fact, a summary of what white middle class America of the time expected of men. Hence, he describes himself as having a "sweet, devious nature" (112) because being drawn to men rather than women, books rather than sports, etc. set him always at odds, oscillating between responsibility (to his class, to his peers?) and desire (to be himself, to follow his drives?). Consequently, his nature is sweet (because he strains to find in himself those traits associated with masculinity) and devious all at once because he cannot will himself into the oblivion of those characteristics which are taken to be un-manly.

This continual duplicity in his behavior, though, can momentarily come to an end in the closing episode of the novel. His two halves -- the sweet middle class boy and the sexually-deviant youth -- are temporarily reconciled in that final act. Going to a boarding school, Eton, to escape the (bad) influence of his mother and, by acquiring a male role model, to "become" a man, he meets, among many others, Mr. Beattie, a jazz drummer

who, in an analogy to the beatniks, taught music at the boarding school. The singular appearance and behavior of Mr. Beattie escapes the common pattern of the other teachers at Eton; he is a "hipster" who

> had, it seemed, only one suit, a shiny gray sharkskin, the baggy pants radically pegged, the jacket's lapels narrow and usually turned up as against a draft ... He projected a strong, almost rancid sexuality, but it was hard to place. It was too canny and too asymmetrical to seem robustly masculine in the old sense. (207)

Mr. Beattie has too much to puzzle the narrator: his masculinity is not robust in the old sense, it is unconventional, and exhales a rancid sexuality. In addition to that, he discovers that Mr. Beattie is also a drug dealer in Eton. All of these traits attract the narrator's interest because his "sweet and devious" nature is, all at once, challenged by this man's lack of conformity. He is both sexually attractive to a deviant nature like his own and at the same time someone who, by the same token, can be subjected to control by his sweet conformist side. See what follows:

> I had my appointment with the headmaster at four. At five-thirty, after I'd betrayed Mr.Beattie, I'd return to have sex with him. ... He wouldn't be able to discredit me by saying I was a practicing homosexual since we would have practiced homosexuality together. He'd be powerless. I would have gotten what I wanted, gotten away with it and gotten rid of him: the trapdoor beside the bed. At last I could seduce and betray an adult. (214)

At the end of the novel, the narrator -- having first denounced Mr.Beattie for drug dealing and then having had sex with him -- feels he has achieved "the ideal formulation of [his] *impossible* desire to love a man but not be a homosexual" (218, my italics), that is, for a few hours his "sweet devious" nature is reconciled. At this moment his two competing sides, the sweet (conformist) and the devious (gay), are momentarily kept at bay on the balance found by the betrayal of Mr.Beattie prior to having had sex with him. Only the two actions performed in a row could elicit the ideal formulation of his desire. It is following

the "cooperative" spirit of the 1950's that the narrator (a sweet middle class boy) denounces Mr. Beattie to the headmaster of Eton, and then (as the sex deviant youth) has sex with him. This sequence can be seen as a metaphor for the "tranquilizing 1950's": on the surface everything seemed perfect. Everyone had their TV sets, housewives had their home appliances, consumerism presented the solution for everything. But underneath this apparently flawless fabric, the hypocrisy of a society for which appearances mattered most surfaced.

IV - Constructionist argument and Faultlines along the narrative...

A Boy's Own Story displays what Sinfield has developed about the constructionist nature of concepts such as "homosexuality", "heterosexuality", "masculinity", "femininity" and so on. That is, to regard human sexuality as a cultural construct (a cultural creation) rather than something inextricably bound to the physical bodies of men and women. However, Sinfield goes a step further saying that, for example, political and historical circumstances, such as the figure of Oscar Wilde and the trials he was subjected to, might have influenced enormously our present notions of homosexuality -- notably these might have helped the "construction" of a modern queer identity in the twentieth century.

In White's novel, we see that the notion of homosexuality is closely tied to the political agenda of the U.S. in the 1950's -- queers are un-American, therefore, Communists -- but also it is the characteristic lifestyle associated to some specific circumstances. For

example, it was believed that the male child exposed in excess to the mother's care, could "become" a homosexual. Such widely accepted notion is translated by White. In the novel, the narrator's mother wants eagerly to remarry in order to provide him with a suitable male role model: "'are you developing normally?' she asked when I was ten " (76).

Seen from this perspective, queerness is something external to human beings, it is a virus that can infect one's masculinity (however, as with any illness, a process that can be stopped and reversed). In a sequence of A Boy's Own Story, the narrator complains about having been exposed too much to his mother's care. This -- he thinks -- might have damaged his sexuality and made him grow up "abnormally". He says:

> I desperately needed a new beginning. The thought of resuming my life made me want to end it -- unless I could change it completely. If my homosexuality was due to a surfeit of female company at home (for so ran the most popular psychological theory of the day), then I should correct the imbalance by entering an all-male world. In order to become a heterosexual I decided I should attend a boy's boarding school (for so ran my wonderfully logical addendum to the theory). (143)

The narrator's homosexuality is something that can (and must) be corrected because it is an imbalance. Following such reasoning, one can "become" either a man or a homosexual: it depends on the way one is brought up. Since he has been exposed to "a surfeit of female company at home", he is in danger of becoming effeminate (sexually damaged). More than once the narrator uses the word "effeminacy" to describe himself. In one passage he discusses opera with Mrs. Cork (Kevin's mother) and says: "I relaxed and became animated to the point of effeminacy" (13). Hence, effeminacy is a state produced in men when they are too close to women.

This proximity with women is also what had characterized the concept of "effeminacy" in Wilde's time. However, Sinfield has shown in The Wilde Century, the

term had a distinct interpretation in Victorian England (and in the centuries before). First, effeminacy was exclusively associated to upper class men. Second, men only became effeminate by spending too much time with women (thus acquiring feminine traits, such as sensitiveness and self-indulgence). Third, an effeminate man was not a homosexual (simply because Victorians did not have such concept).

The association between effeminacy and homosexuality is relatively new: a consequence, as Sinfield argues, of the Wilde trials in the late nineteenth century. By the middle part of our century, people were already regarding one in connection with the other. This is not different in A Boy's Own Story -- here the narrator shows apprehension because the insidious influence of his mother is damaging his sexuality. As a result, he is not maturing properly, but becoming effeminate. The consequence of effeminacy is homosexuality, and the way to correct this "imbalance" is to attend a boy's boarding school (the company of other men would teach him how to be a man).

Thus, if a man may become effeminate (homosexual) through a "surfeit of female company" he can, by the same token, also reverse the situation (as psychoanalytic therapy in the 1950's believed). In the novel, this change occurs by way of two different processes: Psychoanalysis and religion. At Eton, the narrator is befriended by a couple of teachers, Mr. and Mrs. Scott, who are members of the Church of England. As their friendship grows, the narrator decides to tell DeQuincey and Rachel (the Scotts) about his homosexuality. See what follows: "One night I told the Scotts of my struggles against homosexuality and of my present effort to be cured through psychoanalysis" (190). The reaction of the Scotts is punctuated by sympathy and preoccupation for the boy's fate. They say: "You poor, poor boy. But surely you haven't *acted* on these impulses, have you?" (190).

Similarly to the narrator's tentative to be "cured" from his homosexuality through psychoanalysis, DeQuincey has been cured from his by way of religion and marriage (a practice still true in the 1990s). The narrator, who is still trying to cope with this "imbalance", believes in DeQuincey's story because it serves him as a motivation:

> I learned that DeQuincey had also been homosexual briefly, a period just before his marriage and conversion, a period adumbrated as a time of faltering, of humiliation, exhaustion and confusion... Now he was no longer homosexual, not in any way, nor did he ever experience even the slightest twitch of the forbidden desire. This complete change he attributed to Christ and Rachel. (191)

Though DeQuincey had been "briefly" homosexual for a period he has never "acted on these impulses", i.e., he has never had sex with men. His homosexuality is characterized just as a period of "faltering, of humiliation, exhaustion and confusion" and he never says what has caused this. What matters is that the ideology of the time makes it possible to believe that one can cease being a homosexual to become a heterosexual man (and vice-versa). This "shift" of classification to sexual behaviors only contributes to reinforce Sinfield's opinion that sexualities -- both heterosexuality and homosexuality -- are merely acquired cultural constructs that have nothing to do with the physically inherited characteristics of human beings. In the novel, although the narrator was born a man, his behavior (he cannot throw a ball, his hands are always in the air, he likes opera and books) is other than the accepted pattern common to his sex, so he "becomes" a queer. Following the opposite direction, DeQuincey ceases being homosexual (he marries Rachel and converts to the Church of England) to "become" a heterosexual man again (at least in the eyes of society).

Cold War preoccupation with Freud's latency is also a subject matter used by White in A Boy's Own Story. The narrator says he has "heard" that boys passed through a stage

of homosexuality in their infancy, and that this stage was "normal", "universal" and temporary (though at the end of the novel we discover that it did not happen in the narrator's case). Hence, these distorted ideas about sexuality, conveyed by psychoanalysis broadly in the 1950's, became a common sense to people; they really believed them. Nevertheless, Sinfield regards latency as a *faultline story* -- an unresolved issue -- something people took for granted without much questioning (considering that it was the theory of the time). In fact, he argues that

> Cold War U.S. culture wanted latency -- that is why it went on about it. It was the most far-reaching way of worrying about manliness. That culture also did not want latency -- it was too uncomfortable. How could communism be defeated if so many Americans were un-American? Latency is a faultline story. (Cultural Politics 42)

Cold War *latency* is, in fact, a controversial question: at the same time that it transformed every men in potential homosexuals, it transformed them into potential Communists, too. It follows that no one is beyond suspicion, no one is innocent. Of course in the novel the narrator is never a suspect for having been a Communist, once he is just a child. His boyhood serves as an excuse that prevents people from regarding him as un-American, though it does not prevent them from considering him a sissy (when a boy) and a homosexual (when a youth).

However, Marylin and Fred are taken as Communists because they simply do not "fit in" the usual social roles they are expected to. There is an established ideology behind which makes the old ladies in the hotel regard Fred and Marylin as Communists. For those old ladies, it has become common sense to have such opinion, this is a consequence of their shared social experiences. The *conditions of plausibility* -- that is, Cold War ideology -- make it possible (and plausible). It gives credibility to the warning given by them to the narrator's mother because she, too, shares the same experiences.

I have tried to demonstrate that in A Boy's Own Story the notion of homosexuality shared by people is the outcome of a specific historical and political moment: the Cold War. Moreover, I have tried to demonstrate how the nineteenth-century concept of effeminacy was still influential and predominant during the 1950's, though in a different manner. Sinfield's theory served as the basis and guide for this investigation. It has authorized the conclusion that in the 1950's America the concept of homosexuality was already the one which came out of the Wilde trials in 1895: homosexuals are aesthetes, effeminate, immoral and decadent. A basic difference, however, is that in the 1950s (as one can see in White's novel) homosexuality had already become an incorporated lifestyle by society -- one that is discriminated. Moreover, with its "theorization" by Freudian psychoanalysis, it has assumed a medical condition -- it became a disease. In the following chapter, I will be analyzing how the notion of homosexuality is constructed during the 1980's America (the Reagan era) and its intrinsic relation to the AIDS epidemic. Also I will be focusing its fictional representations in White's Skinned Alive (1995).

[1]Sinfield regards the word "American" as an ideological construct; an imperial ideology.

[2] The term "sissy" was applied to an effeminate boy or man whose behavior escaped the male patterns of the time (the 1950's).

[3] In fact, as one can see, misconceptions.

Chapter III

I - The 1980s America: the Reagan era, political conservatism and the AIDS epidemic

When Republican president Ronald Reagan took office in January 1981, half a century of Democratic dominance ended. That is to say, the U.S. experienced a reawakening of the conservatism it had been cultivating and expecting since long. Reagan entered the presidency promising a balanced budget, peace (that would be achieved through large investments in military armament) and an emphasis on "family values." In America Past and Present, the authors argue that "[in] Ronald Reagan, the Republicans had found the perfect candidate to exploit both the American people's frustration with the domestic and foreign policy failures of the 1970s and the growing conservative mood of the nation" (975).

The same year Reagan took power, scientists reported the emergence of an unknown disease -- an uncommon form of pneumonia and a strange kind of skin cancer. The first cases were discovered in the New York and San Francisco areas, and curiously its victims were all men. In June, 1981, the Center for Disease Control divulged a bulletin highlighting the appearance of the strange affliction. By this time, American people were scared and curious about the nature of this new public health menace. Years later, scientists discovered

it was caused by an unknown virus from Central Africa -- a virus they named HIV -- and that it was manifested principally in gay men (i.e., its main form of transmission was initially linked to male homosexual relations only). Thus, the disease became known as "the gay cancer", though for a short period. After long studying it, the scientists discovered that people could be infected with AIDS by use of shared needles (especially intravenous drug users) or in blood transfusions (hemophiliacs). The disease, then, also proved to be a threat to heterosexuals who, in face of the new discoveries, started to fear the possibility of infection by way of a blood transfusion or even by casual contact (though scientists insisted that the disease could only be acquired through exchanging of bodily fluids). The hysteria over AIDS took over the country from coast to coast, and its consequences soon began to appear: in some states, such as Texas, authorities even studied the possibility of segregating AIDS victims.

The conservative atmosphere surrounding the Reagan administration delayed immediate measures to be taken against the epidemic. Perhaps homosexuals were not included in the "family values" Reagan promised to fight for. His government initially invested little money for AIDS research and almost none for prevention campaigns. The need to reduce the deficit and the conservative antipathy for gay men turned to be the main causes for the U.S. government inefficiency to approach AIDS right in its beginning. It was only in 1987 that Reagan appointed a special commission destined to study the disease, and in 1988 Congress decided to spend $1.3 billion in the fight of AIDS. Critic Alan Sinfield comes to the sad conclusion that "[w]hile AIDS was thought to affect only gay men, governments did almost nothing about it; but for gay subculture, thousands more would be dying now" (Cultural Politics 82).

However, one must remember that, for gay men, AIDS did not represent only a deadly threat: it also represented a considerable loss of the achievements gay liberation movement had fought during the 1970s. The Stonewall generation, after gaining a significant degree of respect and social freedom, started to be -- once again -- regarded as sexually depraved people. In fact, one can note that "AIDS has facilitated the revival of good-and-evil" (The Wilde Century 161), as Sinfield says. It follows that this condition fitted well the "conservative mood" of the nation during Reagan's administration. That is, for the conservative-minded people, gay men were (again) the scapegoat, and AIDS a godsend.

Edmund White's Skinned Alive recuperates much of this ambiance: of the nine short stories in the book, six point to the AIDS epidemic, more specifically to its appearance in the early 1980s and the devastating consequences -- both physical and moral -- for gay men. The representation of the homosexual nature of the characters (most of them HIV-positive people) is constructed always considering the distance existing between their innermost feelings (the cure of AIDS, for example) and the contempt of a prejudiced white middle class American society. These characters are torn, divided people -- having to fight both death and people's discrimination, and to carry the AIDS' stigma. The relevance of these stories in the world today is what has made me include them in this research.

II - AIDS as a main theme in Skinned Alive: The plagued city...

"The story form is a good one for dealing with AIDS because it allows the reader to move in and out of the subject matter without having to deal with a huge, long AIDS novel, which is usually such a gloomy affair" (Our Edmund n.pag.), said White in a recent interview. He also said that the task of writing a book of short stories had been a challenge to him, since he was primarily a novelist. Skinned Alive, then, is a compilation of challenging stories, both for strengthening White's fictional abilities and also because, dealing explicitly with characters suffering from the disease, these stories open up new narrative fields. Taking place in the U.S. and sometimes abroad right after the emergence of the AIDS epidemic in the early 1980s, White stories portray a time when the disease was still strongly surrounded by uncertainty, ignorance, fear of contagion and most of all strong discrimination. Both stories I analyze here sum up many of the misguided thoughts of this grim era.

"Running on Empty" begins with Luke, a young translator living in Paris who has been infected with the HIV virus, going back to Texas to visit his relatives in what he thinks might prove his last chance to see them before he is taken too seriously ill. White dedicates the whole story to demonstrate the gulf that separates Luke -- his personality and his condition as an HIV positive -- from his uncomprehending Baptist relatives. The setting for the story is a variety of small towns in which Luke's relatives live.

Right at the beginning of the story, the readers are informed that there is something wrong with Luke, though the narrator does not mention what it is. On the plane back to the

States Luke meets Sylvain, a young French man on vacation. The stranger's appearance -- which is described as healthy and youthful -- is what most distresses Luke: "They were speaking French, since Sylvain confessed he couldn't get through even one sentence in English. Sylvain smiled and Luke envied him his looks, his health, even his youth, although that was absurd, since Luke himself was barely twenty-nine" (28). Here readers are left pondering what toll a disease such as AIDS may impose on Luke, who is left envying Sylvain for his health and youth. For a moment, Luke is transformed into a sort of "vampire" -- his envy seems unprecedented coming from a young person.

The answer, though, comes a few pages later in the form of Luke's indignation for having been infected by the HIV virus. It shows both his consternation which, as the narrator says, derives from the fact that he ascribes the disease to a specific group of people, a group that (in his view) he does not belong to; but also the early misconceptions regarding AIDS. Luke had "never enjoyed gay life as such. At least New York clones had never struck him as sexy... [he] had sought out sex with working men, straight men or close approximations of that ideal" (34). This is the reason why he cannot understand being infected:

> [H]e'd been surprised when he of all people had become ill. It was a gay disease and he scarcely thought of himself as gay. In fact, earlier on he'd once talked it over with an Irish teacher of English who lived in his hotel, a pedophile who couldn't get it up for anyone over sixteen. They'd agreed that neither of them counted as gay. (35)

True to the early 1980s, Luke's opinion about AIDS mirrors that carried out by the institutions (the media, the medical establishment) to the general public, that it was restricted to gay men. Though he engages in homosexual acts and is an HIV-positive, his refusal to regard himself as a gay man -- solely because he did not welcome the only gay

life he knew of (New York queers, whom he considered uninteresting) -- is the source of his prejudice and misconceptions about his own identity and condition. Moreover, in his view, the fact that his sexual experiences had mostly been with "straight" men, and therefore should not count as gay, would protect him. What he has not foreseen is that the disease would surpass the protection offered by those labels. "Straight" and "gay" did not guarantee security to anyone; at the most they only helped further discrimination.

Hence, Luke's subjectivity, the way he regards the disease (and perhaps the way he sees himself), can be seen as a succession of misunderstandings which are in turn inscribed within a broader cultural/ideological production: the one which had become common sense in the early 1980s about AIDS. As Sinfield states "[the] strength of ideology derives from the way it gets to be common sense" (Faultlines 32). Thus, Luke's thinking it is "plausible" (as Sinfield would say) to ascribe AIDS to gay men only is a way of "sharing" the common belief of the time (after all, we are social individuals) and also a way he found to protect himself, though it did not work.

In France, Luke had "read of the hysteria in America" (36) over AIDS. Thus, back to the States he fears the reaction of his family: his Texas relatives are described as strongly conservative members of the Baptist church. However -- for the most part -- Luke's relatives do not even suspect of his state. The fact that Luke had been a brilliant student as a youth, a teacher in New York and had lived for four years in Paris working as a translator, added to the fact that he is a homosexual and now an HIV-positive, helps distanciate him from his "dull" relatives. Because their totally different life experiences make it impossible for his relatives to understand, accept or peer through his lifestyle, he feels "surrounded by women and death" (48) with no one to talk to. Luke's fondness for Beth (his favorite

cousin) does not help communication either: they cannot talk openly about his situation. She is an austere woman with a rigid moral code based on religion and the Bible. Luke, who had told her ten years ago about his "vice", thinks she might consider him "a sinner -- lost, indeed damned" (39). Luke realizes that Beth "probably saw his disease as another proof of Satan's reign or God's punishment. He knew the Texas legislature was considering imprisoning diseased homosexuals who continued having sex" (45). AIDS is transformed into a religious metaphor, either as an evidence of Satan's dominion over the world or a punishment sent by God. The "diseased homosexuals" who continue spreading the virus (the scapegoats) might be kept imprisoned in order to "protect" the other citizens (as they really were, in Cuba, for example).

However, in spite of Beth's opinion about his lifestyle and his disease, Luke -- as a human being -- still thinks of sex, or better, of his impossibility of having sex: "Oh, Luke ached for sex. He thought that if he could just lie next to a man one more time, feel once more that someone wanted him, he could die in peace" (42). White exposes in the story the diverse and conflicting feelings felt by the AIDS victims -- the struggle to demand respect from a contemptuous society, the impotence in the face of prejudice, and most of all, the importance of love and understanding these people deserve but rarely receive. If in the beginning of his disease Luke had been more optimistic and brave (he wanted even to find a cure for it), he loses his confidence and surrenders to despair as the disease progresses and he does not see the possibility of escaping such destiny. After all, he "knew how quickly a life could be reduced" (52).

The last episode in the story can be taken as an allegory of Luke's lack of confidence. Going for a walk with Beth, Luke meets a group of teenagers in a park. Hours

later at dawn, he goes jogging (perhaps an allegory of his own life) and, as he reaches the same location, an astonishing remembrance strikes him:

> Then he remembered that right around here the redhead had pissed a brown circle and Luke looked for traces of that stain under the tree. He even touched the dust, feeling for moisture. He wondered if just entertaining the outrageous thought weren't sufficient for his purposes, but, no, he preferred the ceremony of doing something actual.
>
> He found the spot -- or thought he did -- and touched the dirt to his lips. He started running again, chewing the grit as though it might help him to recuperate his past if not his health. The transfusion of wet even gave him a new burst of energy. (53)

Luke's despair attains its climax with his extreme gesture of touching the dirt to his lips where he has seen the boy urinating. He would like to lie next to a man only one more time, and to feel that someone still wanted him, so that he could die in peace: his desperate gesture is the closest approximation of this wish -- this "ceremony" is the closest approximation of a physical contact he can afford.

Luke says he was "offended that a virus had been permitted to win an argument... He'd cast aside all the old sins, lived freely -- but soon Beth could imagine he was having to pay for his follies with his life. It offended him that he would be exposed to her self-righteousness" (50). To the readers the story ends with no possible catharsis. On the contrary, we are left with a bitter feeling after Luke tastes the dirt. This not only marks the impossibility of Luke's escape but also the lowest degree of self-humiliation imposed by society through the disease.

Finally, one more thing has to be said about the story -- it is the implication given by White's choice of using a third person narrator to the narrative as a whole. If all of Luke's thoughts are conveyed through and by this narrator, the other characters -- like Beth -- are never given voice in the narrative. The immediate consequence of this, is that we can only

have access to their personalities through the narrator's account (sometimes speaking for Luke). The readers are never introduced to Beth's own thoughts or feelings, only what Luke "imagines" they might be. Thus, Luke "imagines" that Beth sees his disease as God's punishment (in fact, Beth does not even know about his illness), or that she considers him "damned" for being a homosexual. What probably leads Luke to "imagine" such things is that Beth is a missionary from the Baptist church, her views are extremely conservative, and for her all human tragedies are a proof that we are going to see "the Final Days" (45). Hence, in "Running on Empty" prejudice has a double edge: it comes from both sides (even if they are totally different from each other).

White uses diverse mechanisms to represent these two sides -- i.e., Luke and his relatives -- but he relies especially on the setting to construct such differences. Thus, Luke's relatives are portrayed as the typical Texans -- whether it is in their simplicity or their accent, the way they dress and behave or in their religiousness and political conservatism. In opposition to that, Luke's remembrances are almost always linked to New York (where he has taught at a private school, met rich people and learned good manners) and Paris (which is a settled cultural token by itself). Luke is the one who had "cast aside all the old sins, lived freely" (50). He has abandoned all dogmas (religious or political) he has been exposed to in his earlier years in Texas, in favour of a free existence. But as he becomes ill, he is forced to return to Texas where the "old sins" reappear to haunt him. AIDS changes his life in all aspects: from Europe to Texas, from freedom to the "old sins", from ease to the confrontation with his own prejudices and fears.

AIDS is also one of the themes of "An Oracle", though here the changes drastically imposed by the disease on Ray's life, the main character, happen in a different manner. At

the beginning of the story, again a third person narrator informs the reader that George, Ray's longtime lover and companion, has died of AIDS-related illnesses. Ray and George were part of the first affluent "Stonewall Generation" in New York ("the plagued city"). Having lived with George for twelve years, till his death, Ray is portrayed at the moment of transition between the death of his lover and the uncertainty about his own life. What makes "An Oracle" such an unusual story about AIDS is the fact that Ray, differently from Luke and George, does not know if he has been infected with the virus or not. At the time George was still alive, he refused to call up a doctor to find out the results of his own blood test. George argued that Ray was "being irresponsible" (113) to himself. Ray's point of view was that

> the test would tell him nothing -- or tell him that yes, he'd been exposed to the virus, but nothing more. And besides, there was no preventive treatment. Anyway, he owned all his devotion to George; he didn't want to think for a second about his own potential illness. (113)

As George's condition declines -- perhaps as an escape -- Ray spends the whole time taking care of George whose disease lasts for fifteen months. If taking care of George can be thought of as preventing him from thinking about the possibility of his own contagion, it also shows a much less talked about issue: the lives of those who have -- by taking care of people infected with the virus -- lived through the whole process as well. Thus, Ray gives up social life (including his old friends), and much of his own personal life and dedicates himself entirely to the new HIV-infected George that emerges.

Readers are never told whether Ray has been infected with the virus or not, the doubt continues until the end of the story. After George's death, though, Ray's behavior changes: from his initial aversion to the subject, he adopts a more rational attitude towards

the problem. He begins acting "as if" he is carrying the virus; thus, he worries not about whether he has or not the virus, the endless loop of contagion, but on not transmitting it to anyone. Yet, right after George's death, Ray seems so starved he has sex with three different men he met on the street. The narrator says that Ray has "clung to their warm bodies, their air-breathing chests and blood-beating hearts, clung like a vampire to warm himself through transfusions of desire" (130). Similarly to Luke's envy of Sylvain's health and youth, Ray has "clung" to the warm bodies of these young men, as if this could give him a "transfusion" of life, health and youth -- or at least make him forget the trauma left by George's tragic death. This might explain why White has compared Ray with a "vampire" (in Luke's case he does not say it explicitly, but it is my suggestion). Both Luke and (perhaps) Ray are sick and both envy or desire the beauty, health and youth of men (supposedly free of the disease). However, after this episode Ray becomes a celibate, he says he "[doesn't] want to expose anyone to contagion" (130).

After a year of celibacy in which Ray spends his time mourning George's death, he decides to accept an invitation from Ralph (a distant friend) to take a trip to Xania, Greece. He was trying to overcome the loss and to follow George's frequent advice: "you must look out for yourself" (116). There, Luke comes upon a new reality: he meets a number of old American gay men who traveled to Greece "for the summer 'phallic cure'"(128). At first Luke becomes surprised with his discovery: for him gay liberation had extinguished this practice. Those old American gay men went to Greece for "the locals" or "the boys," -- they pay to have sex with young men, a practice commonly known as "rough trade." According to Sinfield, one of the consequences of the queer stereotype (which, in his view owns much to the Wilde trials of 1895) was the emergence of "cross-class liaisons, between the effete

gent and the 'manly' lower-class boy" (The Wilde Century 149). Of course almost a century separate these two episodes, especially because after the economic changes brought about by World War II, the Wildean model of the queer -- based mainly on class aspects -- lost its strength. But still the relation between old gay men and the poor Greek teenagers presented in "An Oracle" has as its premise the economic basis.

If Ray is a little shocked with this grim reality at first, as he meets Homer, one of the old gay men living in Xania, he begins to change his opinion about paying for sex. Homer was a classics professor in the States, he knew how to listen to people, so Ray felt he was someone trustful enough to tell about his scruples: "I just don't think I should expose anyone else to this disease in case I've got it or in case I'm contagious. And I'm not disciplined enough to stick to safe sex." (135). Homer, who has been living in Greece for a certain time, is not acquainted with the disease, so he asks Ray to explain what exactly is "safe sex." Ray states that "[strictly] safe is masturbation, no exchange of body fluids. Or if you fuck you can use a rubber. But I'm not worried about myself. The only one in danger where fucking and sucking is involved is the guy who gets the come" (135). Comically enough, Homer says that the Greeks, then, "are *always* safe. They're the men; we're the girls" (135). Greek men think it is normal to get money for sex, but they still considered themselves as "straight men", while the Americans are the *poosti*, the faggots.

Thus, Ray develops a relation with Marco, a poor young Greek. They start having daily sexual encounters for which Ray has to pay. This, according to Homer, was his "only option" (135) because of the disease. What Ray cannot understand is why Marco insists in the use of prophylactics since their first encounter:

> Why rubbers? Ray wondered. Has he heard of our deadly new disease way out here at the end of the world, in a country where there are only two recorded cases, both of whom were visitors to New York? No, he must have in mind the old, curable maladies. Or maybe he just wants to dramatize our roles. I don't mind. (141)

First Ray refers to AIDS as "our deadly new disease" as if it were something exclusive to the United States. In fact, the story takes place at a time when the disease was just emerging, people had little (or almost none) concrete information about it, and they could scarcely imagine that the disease could be so easily transmitted and spread around. Secondly, Ray thinks it is improbable that Marco could know about the disease living in Xania (the end of the world). One cannot forget how little governments -- especially Reagan's -- have done to alert people about the disease right in its beginning, and how it had contributed to an enormous increase in the number of people infected, both in the States and abroad. Finally Ray concludes that Marco insisted on the use of condoms because of the "old, curable maladies" or perhaps just to "dramatize" their roles: Marco is the active man, and Ray the *poosti* -- the passive queer. These are the assumed roles for their engagement -- the previous condition that makes everything clear, even before it happens. As Sinfield has pointed out, what determines sexual identity in our society is "one's particular situation within the framework of understanding" enclosed in human relations (The Wilde Century 11). Such way of seeing the world (that is socially shared) validates some specific experiences, make them "plausible" -- at the same time that it refute others. This might explain why certain sexual practices (such as Ray's) carry the burden of labels such as "queer", and others not.

Despair is an inevitable consequence in Ray's affair with the teenager, the same despair experienced by Luke at the end of "Running on Empty." And again it ends by turning Ray's ordinary behavior into an extreme act:

> And then Ray, a famous beauty in his own right, a perennial hot number, hard to please, easily spooked by a maladroit cruiser, pursued throughout his twenty years of gay celebrity by hundreds of equally beautiful men... -- This Ray (he was trembling as he knelt) knelt before what could only be white jockey shorts...pulled down the elastic waist of the underpants and tasted with gratitude the hot, slightly sour penis. He whose conscience years of political struggle had raised now sank into the delicious guilt of Anglo fag servicing Mexican worker, of cowboy face-fucked by Indian brave... He felt like an alien being recharged by spaceship transfusion. (144)

Sex becomes a "transfusion" of energy, of new life, similar to the transfusion of energy felt by Luke as he touches the wet dirt to his lips (yet, one cannot deny some degree of self-humiliation implied not in the act itself, but in the change in Ray's behavior). It is as if these two gestures could restore the health of the two characters, to bring back their former lives -- to redeem them from the degradation provoked by society through the disease. However, differently from "Running on Empty" where it seems the main character has no second choice, in "An Oracle" Ray is given a new chance, even if it is going back to New York to continue his life (after all, he does not know if he has the virus or not). Ray thinks that his love for Marco is a second chance he has been given, but as he leaves Xania, Marco says "you must look out for yourself" (155). Finally he "smiled and cried as he'd never yet allowed himself to cry over George, who'd just spoken to him once again through the least likely oracle" (155). At the end of story we are left with a (tiny) feeling of hope, of a future to come, even if it is an uncertain one.

Besides its main conflict (Ray's doubt about his health condition and future after the death of his lover), "An Oracle" also offers other secondary themes that deserve

attention. For example, the story recovers the Romantic myth of the decadent civilization (in this case, New York) that is redeemed by rural purity, as it was in Rousseau. Ray has to leave his besieged city where he has come through loss and death to find redemption, and this he finds in Greece (just like in Romanticism). After this occurrence, as in a rite of passage, Ray is ready to return to New York and continue his life. White's choice of using Greece in the story is not by chance: the tradition of Greece as a place of mysticism, beauty and purity (and a lot deal of homoeroticism) serves as the perfect contrast to Ray -- a degraded man from a corrupted and plagued city. Moreover, since the story takes place in the early 1980s, AIDS was still almost inexistent in many places, such as Greece. This is why Ray refers to AIDS as "our deadly new disease" (141) -- it was, at that time, something nearly exclusive to the United States[1]. Thus, it is still possible in the story that Ray finds redemption (or at least a shelter) from the disease. Unfortunately, today there is not a single place where one can be safe from such a terrible affliction, but literature -- especially gay fiction -- has been successful in representing this human tragedy with discernment.

III - Stories of wound and rancor...

Edmund White thinks the stories he wrote in Skinned Alive follow a slightly different trajectory from other fictional representations of the AIDS epidemic, especially those melodramatic and sentimental ones forwarded by AIDS art. White has presented a

new dimension of feelings that were rarely related to the AIDS patient before. He argued in an interview that

> [the] saintliness with which these people have been presented -- both the dying and the caretakers -- is so repellent. Because anybody who's actually lived through it knows that you're full of second thoughts and vile thoughts and disloyal thoughts and desires to escape. And there's so much rancor, especially when the person who dies is young. He feels rancorous toward his partner, or toward the world. All that has to be dealt with in a much more honest way than it ever has been before. (The Importance 124)

Thus, in a sense, White's stories can be seen as radically diverging from contemporary stereotyped representations of AIDS. Instead of "romanticizing" this situation (though it is a tragic one), White deals with the disease in a much more sincere way, so as to be as honest as possible in his portrayal. Take Luke's case, for example: White does not romanticize Luke's character by presenting him as a helpless victim. Or take Ray's evasive decision of not calling the doctor to find out the results of his blood test. He prefers the doubt of not knowing to the certainty of the disease. Of course this is not saying that White compels "everyone" to living in doubt (Ray) and rancor (Luke), but this attitude illustrates a way of looking at AIDS as it really is: a terrible disease.

Jeffrey Weeks argues in his essay "Values in an Age of Uncertainty" (1991) that, until now, AIDS has been surrounded by a "baroque language and [a] proliferation of metaphors" (389). The use of this kind of language shows how distant we are from responding positively to the HIV virus and to the AIDS patient. Contrary to this position, Weeks states

> I agree fully with those who refuse to see "AIDS" as a metaphor for anything. It is, as AIDS activists have put it, "a natural disaster," though one helped along by prejudice, discrimination, and less than benign neglect. It is not a judgment from God, not "nature's revenge" on any group of people, not a symbol of a culture gone

> wrong. HIV disease is an illness like any other, and it should be confronted with all the compassion, empathy, and resources that other major health crisis demand. (389)

However, one must be aware that literary representation tends to rely heavily on metaphor -- in fact, literature could not sustain itself without the use of metaphor. Ultimately, it can be said that one cannot exist without the other. Though White (as a writer) is perfectly aware of this fact, he makes an effort not to extend or overuse metaphors in Skinned Alive, simply because it is not his intention to disguise or mask AIDS, but rather to portray it as truthfully as possible. Moreover, it is my opinion that White displays a "social" portrayal of the AIDS epidemic (especially in its beginning). He presents characters suffering not only from the disease (the physical implications), but also from all the prejudice and misconceptions society has imputed on the disease since its emergence in the early 1980s. As Sinfield argues "[the] center takes what it wants, and under pressure will abuse and abandon the subcultures it has plundered" (Cultural Politics 82). If white middle class America "accepted" gay liberation during the 1970s it was solely because they saw in it a new market emerging (gay men are known to be good consumers -- perhaps another false belief?). But as AIDS appeared in the early 1980s, the right-wing bigot proclaimed it was a punishment sent by God, a "gay cancer." For mainstream America, then, gay liberation "had all been a fantasy -- 'the family' should set the limits of human experience" (Cultural Politics 77). It is possible to say that White's stories are a denunciation of this event -- stories of wound and rancor full of political and historical meaning. They are examples of how a dominant ideology (in this case mainstream America) may generate misguided interpretations that end by becoming common sense, and thus assuming an "appearance of truth."

In fact, the assumption that AIDS could affect only gay men (using Sinfield's terminology) is a faultline story -- an unproved theory that soon came to an end once scientists discovered the virus could be transmitted through alternative means, other than the ones known till then (i.e., gay sex). Yet, until that discovery, many gay men suffered from discrimination as a consequence of the lack of information concerning the disease. White's "Running on Empty" is a clear example of this. As Sinfield has said (see Chapter I), every critic should consider literary writing as "a prestigious formation through which faultline stories circulate" (Cultural Politics 13). For him, these "unresolved issues" are the best way to find contradiction pervading the power institutions and its discourse, and consequently, it is a way out of the entrapment model.

[1] As it was mentioned before, the first cases related to the HIV virus were discovered in New York and San Francisco.

Conclusion

One of the main purposes of this research is to map how the American gay writer Edmund White constructs homosexual identities for his characters. More specifically, this research asks what are the elements that instruct their behavior, and at the same time make it possible for the other characters (and for us, readers) to see them as gay. I have also tried to cover the changes that the concept of "homosexuality" has suffered in one hundred years of existence. In this task, a crucial element was taken from the cultural materialist principle that every cultural phenomenon is, in fact, a political manifestation. According to cultural materialist theory, a text cannot be seen as a sealed or closed episode, but rather as the outcome of "the conditions of [its] production and reception in history" (Cultural Politics viii).

Consequently, it is my opinion that White's construction of the homosexual narrator of A Boy's Own Story is bound to the political and historical background from which it derives: the America of the 1950's. Cold War ideology directs all concepts regarding homosexuality in the novel, including the way the narrator sees himself. More than that, such ideology confers to homosexuality -- alongside with the status of a disease, given by Freudian psychoanalysis -- a political definition based on the premise that homosexuals are un-American, thus, Communists. Partly autobiographical, A Boy's Own Story shows the specific connotation homosexuality has assumed (or better, that American society had forced on it) and the difficulties such connotations imposed on homosexuals. White's main

character is a tortured teenager, torn between his sexual impulses and the moral codes (i.e. Cold War ideology) of the white middle class America to which he belongs.

This is not different in White's Skinned Alive. In this book, both stories I have analyzed sum up and are a consequence of the emergence of the AIDS epidemic in the early 1980's, and people's concepts about homosexuality are, in turn, associated with the disease. However, the two stories differ in some basic points: tracing a parallel between them, we will find more differences than similarities. In "Running on Empty" the main character, Luke, does not see himself as a gay man, for he does not take part in New York gay life. Because he thinks AIDS is a gay disease, he resents his contagion. Paradoxically, he tries to be strong in the face of the disease, he believes (in the beginning) that doctors will eventually find a cure for it, so he keeps well informed about any new discoveries. Whereas in "An Oracle", the main character, Ray, has fought for years for political awareness in the gay rights movement -- he is a representative of the Stonewall Generation of the 1970's. Nevertheless, when he is confronted with the threat of AIDS he refuses to face it, by not talking about it, by not thinking about it, eventually by not seeing the results of his blood test (probably because a different, more open attitude was not yet an available or socially accepted option at the time). His complete dedication to George, his deceased lover who was HIV-positive, can also be thought as a way of avoiding his own fate. Despite Ray's political awareness, he lacks a positive attitude toward AIDS while Luke manifests a persistent wish to defeat the disease, to be cured but he rejects being labeled gay. Considering the time and the place in which both stories are developed, Ray seems more likely to have a positive attitude toward AIDS, and Luke less likely to respond to it determinedly. Perhaps this is one of the reasons why White's fiction has become widely

accepted and read: it is his capability of breaking our expectations, of surprising us, that makes his fiction so appealing, so attractive to our eyes.

Essential for this research, too, was Sinfield's theory about the process through which the twentieth-century notion of the queer has come to the surface. In his view, the Wilde trials of 1895 were crucial to the creation of such concept. They have called the attention of Victorian society about the existence of a specific type of person that was, at the same time, a combination of the effeminate and effete upper class men with the outlaw same-sex sodomite. From this time on, homosexuality started to be regarded as a bourgeois behavior, and thus, linked to negative characteristics such as idleness, luxury, immorality, and decadence. Besides, homosexuals were also taken as aesthete and effeminate men (characteristics still quite associated to them in our century).

However, it would be a mistake to say that this same model of queerness, born in the Wilde trials according to Sinfield, can be located in White's work in its completeness. More than a century separates the two, and the world has suffered many changes since Wilde's time: it has witnessed two huge World Wars, the defeat of Communism in Russia, gay and women liberationist movements, the AIDS epidemic and the European common market, among many other important events, so the class manner from which the queer stereotype had been born lost its meaning. Yet, many characteristics commonly associated with the image of the queer out of the Wildean stereotype still persist in our days.

Especially two of these characteristics listed above are still widely related to gay men in the contemporary world: effeminacy and aestheticism. White's A Boy's Own Story explores such theme deeply. The narrator of the novel thinks his masculinity has been damaged due to an excess of female company at home: his mother's care made him become

an effeminate boy. Besides, the narrator is a cultured teenager -- his interest goes from literature to opera, from paintings to theater (what, according to his father, are women's interest, and thus, superfluous). Together with his interest in men, these characteristics form the core of the narrator's homosexual nature in the novel (according to the eyes of society). Similarly to this, in "Running on Empty" Luke dislikes New York queers -- he thinks they are "clones"[1] and their masculinity a fake. He has sex only with working men, and "straight" men, probably because they are not effeminate. He is also a cultured man, a translator who has lived in Paris, someone fond of art and books. Finally, in "An Oracle" Ray does not show any objection or dislike on issues of effeminacy, probably because of his past as a gay activist. Ray is also a learned and refined man who has majored in philosophy. Right after George's death, for example, Ray starts reading The Death Rituals of Rural Greece, by Loring M. Danforth as a solace for his grief -- it is always Art which serves as the background for White's stories. Summing up, in all three characters we can find issues regarding effeminacy or aestheticism, not in the Wildean sense, of course -- in Wilde's time these characteristics were an emblem of a specific social class, while in White's fiction these characteristics have already been crystallized as gay features.

In addition to this, it is not possible to refer to a dominating queer model in the twentieth-century (nor at any given time) that would cover all forms of homosexuality -- this would be a generalization. Jeffrey Weeks, for example, believes that "sexuality can only be understood in its specific historical and cultural context. There cannot be an all-embracing history of sexuality, only local histories, contextual meanings, specific analyses" (Values 394). Still, I believe that the inclusion of Sinfield's analysis of the emergence of a queer model out of the Wilde trials within my research is appropriate and justifiable: if

White's characters differ from such stereotype in some points, they confirm that same stereotype in others, as in the presence of issues concerning effeminacy and aestheticism. The world may have changed considerably, but certain stereotypes still persist -- perhaps a sign that homosexuality is, as never before, a "uniquely peculiar challenge to cultural stability."

[1] Edmund White states in his article "Fantasia on the Seventies" (1977) that, surprisingly, one of the immediate consequences of gay liberation in the 1970s was the "worship of machismo" (40) -- i.e., gay men were unable of extinguishing the "end of role-playing" (40) in sex and in their relations. On the contrary, a "leather scene" was created and with it a new "gay masculinity" came along (the clones he refers to in the story).

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